

Penn State's bid for Rose Bowl fades

by Mark Wogenrich
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STATE COLLEGE, Pa. - On second-and-10, the fourth-quarter clock frozen ominously, Eric McCoo ran a draw play. This time, the Penn State offense thought, it's going to work.

McCoo took two steps before squaring shoulders with Michigan free safety DeWayne Patmon, who shot directly up the middle on a run blitz. Patmon's first tackle of the game halted McCoo for a 3-yard loss. Moreover, it proved the defining moment of the day.

The tricks, drops, picks, flags and fumbles of a disheveled Saturday all masked the undercurrent of Penn State's 31-27 loss to Michigan. But that fourth-quarter draw, and the rushing missteps that preceded it, whittled the game to its essence.

"The running game is what killed us," Penn State Coach Joe Paterno said.

In his 34 years as head coach, Paterno never has witnessed a more meager Penn State rushing performance. The Lions ran 20 times for 7 yards, their lowest total since a 19-yard effort in the 1979 Sugar Bowl (which Alabama won 14-7).

With that, the rest of this eccentric, exciting game which featured three

fumbles, three interceptions, a punt return for a touchdown and referee-induced chaos was nullified. So were Penn State's slim chances of a spot in the national-championship game and, with Wisconsin's victory over Iowa, the Rose Bowl as well.

At 9-2, and facing a visit to Michigan State next week, the Lions appear headed back to Florida (for the Citrus or Outback bowls).

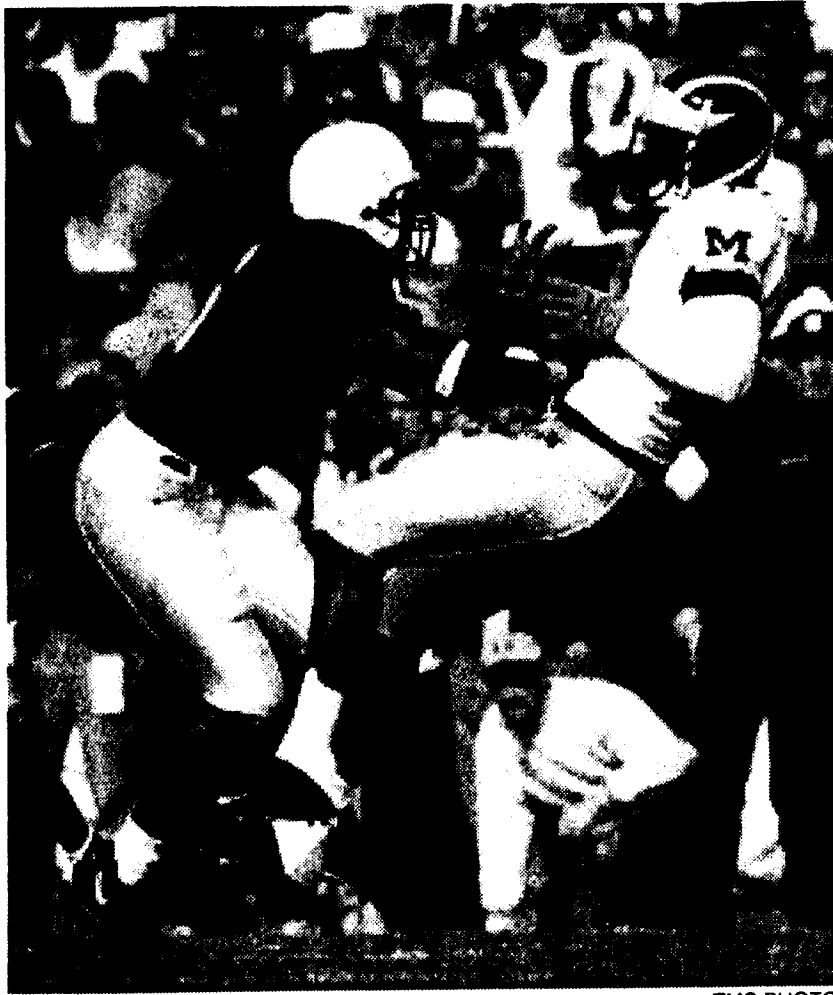
"This team is too good," fullback Mike Cerimele said. "For us to have two losses on our record is very disappointing."

Leading 27-24 with 3 minutes, 21 seconds left, Penn State needed a drive that produced first downs and ate clock. Instead, it collapsed into a 17-second sequence that went three yards backward. Second down was the big one.

Michigan (8-2, 5-2) stymied the Lions all afternoon with a series of aggressive and well-timed run blitzes. The offensive line had enough trouble containing Michigan's defensive front, led by strong-armed nose tackle Rob Renes.

But recurring blitzes from everywhere made running even more difficult. When McCoo was stopped cold, and an incomplete pass followed, Michigan had won a critical series.

"They sent linebackers up the gaps,



TMS PHOTO
Michigan's David Terrell is knocked back by Penn State's James Boyd, left, in Saturday's Big Ten matchup.

corners to the outside and guessed right every time," Cerimele said.

Once that series ended, Penn State's defense returned to the field perhaps for one series too many. After DiAllo Johnson's 24-yard punt return, Michigan quarterback Tom Brady completed two savvy passes to Marcus Knight.

The first, on third-and-10, caught Penn State by surprise, even though it dropped eight players into coverage. Knight, who found a spot in the right flat, went 17 yards to the Penn State 18-yard line.

His second catch proved the clincher. Knight, the inside receiver left, sprinted to the goal line, then sliced toward the end zone's left corner. He beat safety Derek Fox with the move, and Brady softly lofted the game-winning touch down pass, an 11-yarder with 1:46 left.

"I knew we weren't going to lose that game," Brady said. "We weren't done as long as there was time on that clock."

Valiantly, Thompson attempted to lead a two-minute scoring drive at the end. But his day finished as it started.

The quarterback, playing his last game at Beaver Stadium, couldn't escape a blitz from Ian Gold, who forced a fumble. Linebacker Larry

Footo recovered with 53 seconds left, ending the game.

On the game's third play from scrimmage, Thompson fumbled the snap from center Eric Cole. Michigan capitalized with a field goal to take a 3-0 lead.

In between, the fifth-year quarterback threw for 263 yards hit Eddie Drummond with a 38-yard touchdown pass and took more than his share of wallops.

"They were going to have to kill him to put him out of the game," Cerimele said.

Paterno went with Thompson in the second half, hoping his hot hand would overcome the rushing lapse. At halftime, when it had six yards on 12 attempts, Penn State abandoned the run, which made some players wonder.

"If we had poked at them a little more, I definitely think we could have got something going," McCoo said.

That didn't happen. Penn State ran eight times for one yard in the second half. A potential touchdown drive in the third quarter ended because Michigan's James Hall penetrated the line to stop Larry Johnson for a 1-yard loss on third-and-two. The Lions settled for a Travis Forney field goal, which cut their deficit to 17-10.

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