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# A rivalry too toxic? Michigan, Michigan State grapple with the future

Austin Meek Oct 18, 2023

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Strains of “The Victors,” [Michigan’s](#) fight song, reverberated inside the stadium’s cinder-block tunnel as players from [Michigan State](#) trudged to their locker room.

In the grainy footage, it’s easy to identify the moment when everything goes haywire. An event manager stationed near Michigan’s locker room entrance leaps to attention and jogs toward the scene. An official holding the bright orange down marker lets it fall to the ground. Several players come into view: Michigan cornerback Gemon Green, restrained by a player from Michigan State while another Spartan, cornerback Khary Crump, bashes Green with his helmet.

Farther down the tunnel, Michigan cornerback Ja’Den McBurrows is surrounded by white jerseys, shoved against a metal door and thrown to the ground. Michigan State players attempt to corral their teammates and break up the fight. Michigan players walk through the mayhem single file, one lunging toward Michigan State’s locker room before being restrained.

Within hours, officials at Michigan State are in full-on damage-control mode. Talking points and official statements fly back and forth. Chad Hawley, the Big Ten’s senior vice president for policy and compliance, notifies the school that the conference is launching an investigation.

A member of Michigan State’s football operations staff is interviewed, and the notes are shared with MSU athletic director Alan Haller.

“Following the game, a University of Michigan player and his father pushed through police and attempted to attack (redacted) as he was walking to the bus,” read the notes, obtained by *The Athletic* via a Freedom of Information Act request. “MSP (Michigan State Police) did nothing, a member of the Michigan staff got to him prior to an altercation.”

McBurrows suffers facial injuries. Green is diagnosed with a concussion. Michigan coach Jim Harbaugh calls for a criminal investigation. Suspensions are assessed, charges filed, fines levied. In the compressed space of the Michigan Stadium tunnel, an already combustible rivalry has exploded.

Some fans and administrators blamed the incident on a few rogue players who lost their composure. For others, it was the further escalation of a rivalry that has veered dangerously out of control. Earlier this week, the NCAA announced it was [investigating Michigan for sign-stealing](#). After the Big Ten informed Michigan State officials about the allegations, the Spartans considered pulling out of the game but then reconsidered.

Michigan and Michigan State have faced uncomfortable questions about the future of their 125-year-old series. Has the rivalry gotten too toxic? And if so, who’s to blame? Can it be fixed? Or is the hatred too deeply ingrained?



down, got to win and make him not want to play you next season.' And we're astonished when bad things like that happen."

The Michigan-Michigan State rivalry fits a familiar archetype in college football: the massive research institution on the hill and former land-grant agricultural college down the road. The schools have played each other since 1898 and have been conference rivals since 1949, despite [Michigan's backroom maneuvering](#) to keep Michigan State out of the Big Ten.

"I think Michigan State fans look at Michigan as arrogant and pompous and unjustifiably elite," said Greg Dooley, a lecturer at Michigan who grew up rooting for Michigan State and teaches a course on the history of college athletics. "I know Michigan fans look down a little bit at State. State prides themselves from a football perspective on toughness, being a little more blue-collar, and deserving of being on the same playing field with Michigan."

The rivalry has always been intense, but it's grown more hostile in recent years. In 2007, Michigan running back Mike Hart, now the school's running backs coach, famously referred to Michigan State as "little brother." Mark Dantonio, Michigan State's new head coach, fired back that "pride comes before the fall," signaling a new era of hostilities between the programs.

Michigan is 72-38-5 all-time against Michigan State, but the Spartans won the Paul Bunyan Trophy seven times in eight years from 2008 to 2015. Michigan State's rise under Dantonio coincided with Michigan's decline under Rich Rodriguez and Brady Hoke and forced the Wolverines to regard the Spartans as an equal.

"Michigan State really found a hot streak," said Jack Miller, who played center at Michigan from 2011 to 2014. "When I was playing, Dantonio had that team firing on all cylinders. They were playing well. Spartan players and fans and alums enjoyed that run and rubbed it in Michigan's face a little bit."

The chippiness remained, but the quality of the games diminished late in Dantonio's tenure. Dantonio's successor, Mel Tucker, beat Michigan in his first try, inspiring hope that Michigan and Michigan State could be headed for another decade of high-stakes matchups.

In their first meeting as top-10 opponents in more than 50 years, the Spartans overcame a 16-point deficit and beat Michigan 37-33 in 2021 behind five touchdowns from running back Kenneth Walker. Fans celebrated by burning couches and mattresses in the streets of East Lansing, resulting in 57 service calls to the East Lansing Fire Department. Shortly thereafter, Michigan State signed Tucker to a 10-year, \$95 million contract that made him one of the highest-paid coaches in college football.

Within a year, fans and supporters were second-guessing that decision. Last year's loss in Ann Arbor dropped the Spartans to 3-5, and the ugly scene in the tunnel only magnified fans' disappointment.

In the hours after the tunnel incident, school administrators received a deluge of emails from fans who were fed up with the conduct of coaches and players in the rivalry. *The Athletic* reviewed more than 100 pages of correspondence sent and received by officials at both schools in a four-day period following the incident, as well as an incident report from the Michigan State University Police Department.

"It is now an EMBARRASSMENT to be a Spartan for the first time in my life," a fan named Brad Lazorka wrote in an email to Michigan State's president and board of trustees. "Shame on all of you."

"I will not be purchasing/wearing any of my MSU apparel going forward," wrote a fan named Jane Cwiek. "I would not want to give the impression that I condone such criminal behavior."

In an email to Michigan athletic director Warde Manuel, a fan whose name was redacted called the incident "absolutely shameful" and "a result of the continual disrespect displayed over the years by players and the head coach of your football program."

Among those who emailed to express his displeasure was Edward J. Minskoff, a prominent New York real estate developer and Michigan State alumnus and donor.

In 2018, Minskoff donated \$30 million – reported at the time as the largest single gift in MSU history – to complete a pavilion at Michigan State's Broad College of Business. Following the tunnel incident, he sent an email to MSU president Samuel Stanley, who was in his final week on the job after [announcing his resignation](#) two weeks earlier under pressure from the school's board of trustees for his handling of Title IX reports.



“(T)he recent horrible events that took place after the game in my opinion are the full responsibility of the football coach,” Minskoff wrote. “The behavior of his athletes cannot be overlooked ... The board should also cancel Tucker’s \$9M contract as well!!! Otherwise reinstate Sanjay and yourself!!”

In a telephone interview, Minskoff said he remained a fan and supporter of Michigan State, despite what he described as “pretty poor” leadership from the school’s trustees. He considered [Tucker’s firing](#) amid sexual harassment allegations justified but bristled at the suggestion that the tunnel incident or Tucker’s transgressions reflected poorly on the university or the Michigan-Michigan State rivalry.

“What you fail to understand is these are individuals,” Minskoff said. “This is not the university as a whole. It’s not every department of the university, not every athletic team at the university. It’s a single person.”

Speaking to reporters in July, Tucker was adamant that he wouldn’t change his approach to the rivalry, saying hardly a day went by without someone asking him about Michigan.

“It’s the biggest game of the year for us,” Tucker said, “and it’s always going to be that way as long as I’m the coach here.”

Tucker was fired two months later amid allegations that he sexually harassed Brenda Tracy, a rape survivor who speaks to college football programs about preventing sexual assault. Tucker [has denied the allegations](#), stating he believed the relationship was consensual. While Michigan State rides out the season with interim coach Harlon Barnett, the school is searching for a full-time replacement who will get the same questions and face the same pressure to beat Michigan at all costs.

“You just had this confluence of events that have continued to escalate the passion and the disdain for one another,” Miller said. “It’s been a perfect storm that led to an unfortunate situation in the tunnel last year.”

Many of the emails sent to Michigan officials accused the school of turning a blind eye to issues with the stadium tunnel. Two weeks before the incident, players from Michigan and Penn State clashed in the tunnel at halftime, prompting Penn State coach James Franklin to call on the Big Ten to implement a policy to prevent future confrontations.

“Putting Michigan football players and visiting team players in the same tunnel at the same time is only asking for trouble,” one fan wrote to Michigan president Santa Ono. “Trash talk and verbal confrontations, which are commonplace in the tunnel, can easily escalate into physical altercations, as history has shown, so a change in policy, or the construction of a second tunnel, must occur, in order to prevent these ugly incidents from continuing to happen.”



(Scott W. Grau / Icon Sportswire via Getty Images)

As the teams prepare to meet for the first time since the tunnel altercation, fans are understandably wary of another incident. In July, a Detroit radio host cautioned Michigan fans to stay away from Spartan Stadium or risk “eating a battery.” The game will be played at night, which tends to encourage a rowdier crowd. It also will be the first Michigan-Michigan State game since the passage of a state law that allows schools to serve alcohol at sporting events.

Todd Blackledge called last year’s game for ESPN and will be back in the TV booth Saturday, this time as part of the NBC crew. He said he’s not sure what can be done to change the tone of the rivalry, but he’s hoping the teams can figure it out.

“Cooler heads have to prevail in some form or fashion,” Blackledge said. “If that means more security, if that means having a different protocol (for) how teams go in and come out of the locker room, whatever it is. The game’s too good. The rivalry is too important. It’s too special to have it marred by something that’s unnecessary.”

Michigan and Michigan State are capable of setting aside their differences, as they did last year when Michigan State’s basketball team [played at Michigan’s Crisler Center](#) days after a campus shooting claimed the lives of three MSU students. Fans of both teams also have no problem reveling in the other’s pain or piling onto the other’s controversies, whether it was tunnel incident, Tucker’s firing or an NCAA investigation at Michigan that resulted in [Harbaugh’s three-game suspension](#) to open the season.

“It does seem kind of like our political environment right now,” Dooley said. “Everything the other side does is wrong, evil, immoral. The intentions are all sour. I feel like that is what’s happening on both sides of the rivalry right now. There’s no middle ground.”

Michigan conducted a safety review following the 2022 season and removed approximately 45 temporary seats around the entrance to the tunnel after a fan reached out of the stands and made contact with Tucker before last year’s game. The school also has a stronger security presence on the



Crump, the Michigan State player who swung his helmet at Green, won't play in Saturday's game as he serves an eight-game suspension levied by the Big Ten. While other players had their criminal charges dismissed, Crump was charged with felonious assault, pleaded guilty to two misdemeanors and was sentenced to probation under the Holmes Youthful Trainee Act, which allows young offenders to have charges scrubbed from their records.

Crump returns from his suspension Nov. 4. He was contrite about his actions and wrote a letter of apology to Green, who declared for the NFL Draft after last season. Recalling death threats Crump received after the incident, Nichols, his attorney, described the entire experience as eye-opening.

"It's always been, you bleed green or bleed blue," Nichols said. "Maybe it's a confluence of this thing we call social media and the complete bastardization of our priorities as a society, but it just seems like it's way, way disproportionate when you talk about the blind loyalty to the school that you choose."

Michigan-Michigan State is one of 12 rivalries that will be protected in the new 18-team Big Ten, meaning the Spartans and Wolverines will continue to play every year. Pausing the rivalry was a topic among fans, but when the Big Ten gathered feedback on its new schedule, Manuel was "forthright and vocal" that Michigan needed to play Ohio State and Michigan State every year, said Kerry Kenny, the Big Ten's chief operating officer.

But another variation of the big game may be coming to an end.

For decades, student journalists from the State News and the Michigan Daily met for a game of touch football before the main event. Trash talk and cheap shots have always been part of the game, but lately the friendly rivalry has gotten more intense, said Morgan Womack, editor in chief of the State News.

The Daily, which has a significantly larger staff, has won 17 consecutive games, and Womack said students at the State News no longer look forward to the tradition. Womack proposed writing a joint editorial instead, but the Daily declined to participate.

Womack said it will be up to next year's staff to decide whether the game returns in some form, but she's not counting on it.

"We all know how the MSU-U of M game ended last year," Womack said. "We don't want the rivalry between our publications to be headed that way."

*(Illustration: Samuel Richardson / The Athletic; photos: Nic Anti, Scott W. Grau / Getty Images)*

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A Andy J. · Wed

This article fails to foreground the central narrative of this sorry episode: Michigan State players committed multiple assaults on defenseless Michigan players and faced (appropriate) punishment via the criminal justice system.

I don't care that Michigan State fans sent victim blaming emails to Ono and Manuel.

M Matthew L. · Wed

Any coach that says you must "assault" the player across from you, as Nichols is quoted in the piece saying, should not be coach.

It is obviously a violent sport, but "subverting someone's will" on the football field is not the same as assault.

· Wed

Why does the headline make it sound as though both schools are equally at fault? Michigan was not the culprit last year in any way shape or form.

But really, the teams should just take a page from the famed Tobacco Road rivalry. Duke and UNC basketball fans may loathe each other's teams with the passion of a thousand fiery suns, but we don't beat each other up.

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