

Next Stop: Fiesta Bowl!

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COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) - Somehow, the goal posts in Ohio Stadium are still upright. And at long last, Ohio State's perfect season didn't come crashing down against Michigan, either.

Needing every last tick of the clock, the Buckeyes finally got past the Wolverines and will play for a national championship they've been chasing since 1968.

Maurice Hall scored on a 3-yard run with 4:55 left Saturday and the second-ranked Buckeyes survived two late drives by No. 12 Michigan for a 14-9 win that has Ohio State headed to the Fiesta Bowl on Jan. 3.

"We might not go out and score 50 points. We might not hold teams to 10 yards," said Buckeyes running back Maurice Clarett, "but we make the plays when we have to."

Will Allen intercepted John Navarre's pass just short of the end zone with 0:00 showing on the clock for the bend-but-don't-break Buckeyes (13-0, 8-0 Big Ten), who have won six games by seven points or fewer this season.

But coming against the hated Wolverines (9-3, 6-2), this nail-biter was sweeter than all the others.

"When Will made the catch, I just started crying," said safety Michael Doss, who decided to put off an NFL career by staying for his senior season. "We had faith we could win very game, that's what makes this team so special."

The Buckeyes, not expected to be national title contenders, earned a share of the Big Ten title with No. 5 Iowa (11-1) and can now sit back and wait to see who they'll play in Tempe, Ariz., on Jan. 3.

"It's time to party," said defensive end Kenny Peterson. "Fiesta, Fiesta ..."

The time off will also give many of the record 105,539 fans in attendance time to recover from the final tense moments of yet another Ohio State-Michigan classic.

With Michigan controlling play and clinging to a 9-7 lead after three quarters, Ohio State seemed destined for more heartbreak against the Wolverines.

The Buckeyes had undefeated seasons and their national title hopes wiped out in 1995 and 1996 by Michigan.

But this team found a way to win - just as it did early this season at Cincinnati, in

overtime at Illinois last week and with a fourth-quarter comeback at Purdue two weeks ago.

"This is a huge win," said Ohio State coach Jim Tressel, who accepted a Fiesta Bowl invitation after the game. "It's huge because it's 2002 Ohio State-Michigan. We don't worry about history."

In just two years, Tressel has already matched the number of victories his predecessor, John Cooper (2-10-1), had against the Wolverines. No wonder "In Tressel We Trust" T-shirts are being worn on campus.

Clarett energized the Buckeyes and a record crowd by shaking off a shoulder injury to run for 119 yards, breaking Robert Smith's freshman rushing record in the process.

Clarett also caught a 26-yard pass to set up Hall's game-winning TD.

Taking a pitch from quarterback Craig Krenzel, Hall swept into the right corner of the end zone for the only score of the second half.

"It was the only option we've run all year," said Hall. "We felt like it would be a good play near the goal line. I had to get in, and saw nothing but green."

But Michigan, aided by a pass interference call on cornerback Dustin Fox, moved to Ohio State's 44. Navarre then completed a fourth-down pass to Ronald Bellamy before hitting Braylon Edwards to give Michigan a first down at the 30.

That's when Ohio State's defense, which has given up just 63 points in its last nine games, came up with yet another big play, this one by Darrion Scott.

As Navarre stepped up in the pocket, Scott knocked the ball loose and Smith recovered with 2:02 left.

"We flushed him out, and he didn't have time to do what he wanted to do," said Scott, wearing a tortilla-shaped foam hat.

Ohio State couldn't run out the clock, however, as Clarett only picked up 2 yards on three carries, and Michigan got the ball back with 58 seconds left at its 20.

Out of time outs, Navarre (23-of-46 for 247 yards) drove the Wolverines to the 24. He threw one pass out of the end zone with seven seconds left, and then Allen stepped in front of Navarre's final attempt, triggering a wild celebration.

Allen made a similar pick on the final play to preserve Ohio State's win at Cincinnati on Sept. 21.

"He's our miracle man," said defensive coordinator Mark Dantonio.

Ohio State's players danced in a circle as students lifted Krenzel, from Utica, Mich., onto their shoulders as the 80-year-old, Horseshoe stadium shook.

Moments later, fans attempting to rip down the goalpost in the south end were stopped by members of the Ohio State Highway Patrol, who doused them with pepper spray.

The win puts the Buckeyes on course to face No. 1 Miami, the defending national champs. But Ohio State's next opponent mattered little.

"If it's Miami, Washington State or Iowa, we don't care," said Peterson. "We'll play them. We'll play Buckeye style football. It's time to dance."

Michigan's Adam Finley kicked three field goals in a first half dominated by the Wolverines, who didn't even have to punt.

Michigan closed the half with a 19-play drive that ate up 8:24 and ended with Finley's third field goal, a 22-yarder, that put the Wolverines up 9-7.

Only a pass interference call against Edwards, who pushed Chris Gamble to the ground in the end zone, prevented Michigan from having a bigger lead.

"It's a heartbreaking loss," said Michigan coach Lloyd Carr. "We knew at the half we would need a touchdown to win. That's what's really disappointing."

Clarett sat out two of Ohio State's previous three games hoping his shoulder would heal in time for Michigan. He didn't play on the Buckeyes' first series before making his entrance with eight minutes left in the first quarter.

On his first play, he ran 9 yards with a screen pass, and then followed a 7-yard pickup by ripping off a 28-yard run.

However, Clarett took a blow on his shoulder on his next carry and went to the sideline in pain clutching his left arm. He came back and scored on a sweep to put Ohio State ahead 7-3.

"I wasn't worried about the injury," said Clarett. "I just wanted the win."