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Missouri football: Oh, what could have been

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ATLANTA — When both the on-field and postgame fireworks were finished at Saturday night's SEC Championship, a chant began.

The Auburn fans stationed beneath the press box on the north side of the Georgia Dome repeated a three-word battle cry.

"Let's go Spartans!"

It was official. After a 59-42 victory over Missouri, Auburn could finally focus on the possibility of a national championship. Its fans could then root for Michigan State to win the Big Ten title game, a result that would give Auburn the No. 2 ranking in the nation and a date with Florida State in Pasadena.

For the Missouri fans in attendance, the postgame alma mater was especially somber.

Oh, how close they were to being in Auburn's shoes. Black and gold supporters could've been chanting for a Michigan State victory themselves if a few more plays had broken their way.

Henry Josey understood. Entranced by the Auburn celebration, the running back was the last Missouri player off the turf.

"You put so much into it," said Josey, who ran for 123 yards. "You want to be here. You want to win. I didn't want to leave the field tonight, but somebody got me off it finally."

Title games haven't been kind to Missouri, which has had three chances in the past seven seasons to lock up a BCS appearance and two to keep national championship hopes alive.

Tigers teams playing for the Big 12 Championship in 2007 and 2008 gave up 100 total points in two straight losses against Oklahoma.

Auburn chalked up 59 more on Saturday night. Coming into the game, the Missouri defense had not allowed more than 28 in a game all year.

"We've come a long way, right?" center Evan Boehm asked. "But at the same time, I wish this would have come out different."

Now, a team that had dreams of a No. 1 ranking in January is headed out of the BCS — barring a bizarre sequence of events that would involve losses by Ohio State and Florida State, as well as dumb luck in the selection process — and to some place a long way from southern California.

The likely disappointing destination — Capital One? Cotton? Outback? — won't help the Tigers get a big chip off their shoulders.

"Where's the respect at right now?" Boehm asked. "I don't know where the respect's at right now. We weren't respected coming into this game, and we played a tight game against a great Auburn football team. Where's the respect gonna be at? I sure hope we're respected after this game because we put up one great battle."

Across the locker room, defensive end Shane Ray unwittingly answered Boehm's questions.

"We've never been respected," he said. "Still probably not going to be respected."

As usual, Josey offered a ray of hope for the program.

Perched on a chair above the media, his eyes still a bit red from tears, he began to put the loss behind him.

"I'll be back," he said. "Where am I going? I don't think I'm dying. Of course I'll be back. I want to win, and I'm not done yet."

"We have to let this go. It's gonna be a burden on us for a while, but we have some time, and we'll get back to doing what we do. It's definitely not a blown opportunity. We're a great team. We'll be a great team again."

This year was undoubtedly a success: 11 wins, two losses and as high as a No. 5 ranking in the BCS polls. Quite the accomplishment for a squad that was picked to finish near the bottom in the SEC East this preseason.

As guard Max Copeland put it, Missouri was the kid chosen last on the playground.

"I got to take 10 seconds and say, 'Hey, they picked you last for kickball and here you are,'" he said.

Besides the win-loss record and an appearance in the Georgia Dome, what will the fans remember about this team?

"How hard we fought," Josey said. "How close we are and how close they are to us and how much we thank them for being here with us and traveling like they did in the snow and everything. It was just a blessing for them to get here. We know we've got their backs and they've got our backs."

When will Missouri get another crack at Atlanta?

Getting back to the SEC Championship will be extremely tough. Florida won't always lose eight games. Georgia won't always be riddled with injuries. South Carolina will never be an easy out under Steve Spurrier, and so on.

But don't tell Josey that.

"They definitely felt us this season," he said. "They'll feel us again next season."