

The Art of Sign Stealing: Michigan Football and a Pair of Ray-Bans

Max D'Ercole

In January of this year, Michigan won the College Football Championship. The first championship the program hadn't shared with another team since 1948.¹ While many of their fans experienced rapturous joy, many others around the college football world couldn't help but place an asterisk on their championship. Why? Sign Stealing. In this blog post, I will walk you through the scandal that rocked the Michigan Football program and explain how it involves a pair of Ray-Ban Meta Smart Glasses.

In the swan-song year of Jim Harbaugh's tenure as Michigan's head coach, his program once again found itself in another scandal.² While many Michigan fans have hand-waived many of these previous scandals as irrelevant to the team's on-the-field results, it is pretty challenging to argue that here.³ Sign-stealing, college football play calling is done predominantly by team staffers on the sidelines.⁴ Sign-stealing provides an advantage by decoding the other team's signals.⁵ By doing so, the opposing team hopes to counter whatever the opposing side is setting up.⁶ For example, imagine how much easier it would be to dodge a punch if you know when, where, and how it's coming. Sure, it's not fool-proof, but I'd bet you'd be much more likely to dodge it. Essentially, that's sign stealing.

Sign-stealing itself is not inherently illegal.⁷ Michigan quarterback JJ McCarthy admitted to sign-stealing in an interview just prior to the national championship game. The quarterback stated that his program "had to adapt" because in "2020 or 2019 when Ohio State was stealing our signs, which is legal and they were doing it, we had to get up to the level that they were at, and we had to make it an even playing field."⁸ What seems lost on JJ and so many other Michigan fans is that Michigan is not accused of an act "80%" of teams in college football participate in according to him, but it is *how* they have been accused of doing it. That being their extensive network of in-person scouting and utilization of, wait for it, technology.⁹ The NCAA

¹ Edward Sutelan, *History of Michigan Football Championships: How Many National Titles Have the Wolverines Won?*, SPORTINGNEWS.COM (Jan. 8, 2024) <https://www.sportingnews.com/us/ncaa-football/news/michigan-football-national-championships-history/mv3c3pnku2twaqj1o9i2p7ox>.

² Edward Sutelan, *Jim Harbaugh's Timeline of Trouble: From Michigan Sign-stealing Scandal to NCAA 'Cheeseburger' Suspension*, SPORTINGNEWS.COM (Nov. 10, 2023) <https://www.sportingnews.com/us/ncaa-football/news/jim-harbaugh-timeline-michigan-sign-stealing-cheeseburger/0de07eee9a735307e89b010e>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ Lance Reiland, *Football Signs and Signals 101: What It Is, How It Works As We Await The Outcome of The Michigan Investigation*, CLEVELAND.COM (Nov. 11, 2023) <https://www.cleveland.com/osu/2023/11/football-signs-and-signals-101-what-it-is-how-it-works-as-we-await-the-outcome-of-the-michigan-investigation.html>.

⁵ Ralph D. Russo, *Michigan Is Accused of Stealing Other Team's Signs. Here's Why Its Coach Just Got Banned for 3 Games*, AP NEWS (Nov. 10, 2023) <https://apnews.com/article/michigan-sign-stealing-95693e26541f6181320bd31472cf9529>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Colin Gay, *J.J. McCarthy Says Michigan Stole Signs to 'Even Playing Field' with Ohio State*, USA TODAY (Jan. 4, 2024) <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaaf/bigten/2024/01/03/jj-mccarthy-michigan-sign-stealing-ohio-state/72098943007/>.

⁹ Joey Kaufman & Bill Rabinowitz, *Ex-Michigan Staffer Connor Stalions Purchased Tickets to 12 Ohio State Home Football Games*, THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH (Nov. 29, 2023) <https://www.dispatch.com/story/sports/college/football/2023/11/29/connor-stalions-purchased-tickets-to-ohio-state-home-football-games/71741357007/>.

bylaws prohibit “off-campus, in-person scouting of future opponents (in the same season),” and even further: “Any attempt to record, either through audio or video means, any signals given by an opposing player, coach or other team personnel is prohibited.”¹⁰

The person at the center of the scandal is former staff member Connor Stalions.¹¹ Stalions was a lifelong Michigan fan who was a longtime volunteer for the program before joining the program officially as a paid staff member in 2022.¹² The evidence surrounding Stalions’ involvement in the scandal is quite extensive. The news of the scandal broke when ESPN revealed that Stalions, an off-field analyst according to his now deleted LinkedIn page, purchased tickets to over 30 games involving 11 different Big Ten Conference teams, all on his credit card registered to his name.¹³ At least 12 of his ticket purchases were to Ohio State home games.¹⁴ Also notable is the location of the seats, with the majority being on the opposite end of the field from the coaching staff, between the 40 and 50-yard lines.¹⁵ This is significant because these seats provide direct line-of-sight to the staff calling plays on the Ohio State sideline.¹⁶ Further, a former Division III player was allegedly paid by Stalions to attend multiple games.¹⁷ All of this ticket information might also be interesting when contextualized with Stalions yearly salary, \$55,000, particularly when the tickets he was purchasing amounted to “thousands” of dollars.¹⁸ Stalions resigned in early November following the news breaking to the college football world.¹⁹

What does this have to do with technology? The answer might be tied in a particularly fascinating twist of this story to a pair of Ray-Ban Meta Smart glasses. On September 1st, Central Michigan played their home opener to Michigan State, a future Michigan opponent.²⁰ Following the news of the Michigan scandal breaking, images began to circulate of a figure with similar

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Adam Rittenberg, *Michigan Football Analyst Connor Stalions Resigns Amid Investigation*, ESPN (Nov. 3, 2023) https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/38810531/michigan-football-analyst-connor-stalions-resigns-amid-investigation.

¹² Tony Paul, *Did Connor Stalions Actually Show Up on Barstool Set Before Michigan-Ohio State Game*, THE DETROIT NEWS (Nov. 28, 2023) <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/sports/college/university-michigan/2023/11/28/did-connor-stalions-appear-on-barstool-set-before-michigan-ohio-state/71733708007/>.

¹³ Mike Galatzan, *Michigan Wolverines Analyst Connor Stalions Bought Tickets to 12 Ohio State Buckeyes Games Over Three Seasons*, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (Nov. 29, 2023) <https://www.si.com/college/ohiostate/football/michigan-wolverines-analyst-connor-stalions-bought-tickets-12-ohio-state-buckeyes-games-three-seasons#:~:text=On%20Monday%2C%20more%20details%20were,registered%20to%20his%20own%20name;>

Jared Ramsey, *Michigan Football Sign-Stealing Report Said To Be Centered on Connor Stalions: Who Is He?*, DETROIT FREE PRESS (Oct. 20, 2023) <https://www.freep.com/story/sports/college/university-michigan/wolverines/2023/10/20/connor-stalions-michigan-football-sign-stealing-ncaa-investigation/71252783007/>.

¹⁴ *Supra*, Note 9.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Connor Stalions Did Not File Any Expense Reports While Working for Michigan*, FOX SPORTS (Nov. 15, 2023) <https://www.foxsports.com/stories/college-football/connor-stalions-did-not-file-any-expense-reports-while-working-for-michigan>; Jared Ramsey, *Michigan Football’s Connor Stalions Reportedly Bought Tickets to at Least 30 Big Ten Games*, DETROIT FREE PRESS (Oct. 23, 2023) <https://www.freep.com/story/sports/university-michigan/wolverines/2023/10/23/michigan-football-connor-stalions-bought-tickets-big-ten-games-ncaa-investigation/71293342007/>.

¹⁹ *Supra*, Note 11.

²⁰ Adam Rittenberg and Pete Thamel, *CMU Investigating Michigan’s Connor Stalions’ Potential Sideline Presence*, ESPN (Oct. 31, 2023) https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/38787197/cmu-investigating-michigan-connor-stalions-potential-sideline-presence.

stature and profile as Stalions on the Central Michigan sideline, sporting a pair of black sunglasses and facing the Michigan State sideline during a night game.²¹ Fans quickly began to hypothesize that these sunglasses were none other than Ray-Ban Meta Smart glasses, which are capable of taking both photos and videos through cameras in the frame of the glasses.²² Outside of a similar appearance, fans also believed the sunglasses to be the particular Smart glasses due to images surfacing of a blue light emanating from the frame, which is something the Ray-Bans do when recording.²³ Following the revelation of these images, the Central Michigan coach nor the administration could determine the identity of this individual and launched an investigation which is still ongoing.²⁴ The utilization of this technology would firmly place these actions into violation of the second half of the NCAA bylaw.²⁵ It is also hypothesized that Stalions and his associates very likely were recording the sideline from the vantage points of their 40 and 50-yard line tickets, instead of merely memorizing the signs they observed.

And let me be clear, sure, the NCAA announced that they had found “no connection” between Jim Harbaugh and the alleged sign-stealing program.²⁶ I will, however, highlight a few things of note to the reader. Heading into the 2021 season, coach Harbaugh was told he had to either accept an NFL job or that he had one final year to “right the ship.”²⁷ The team had just gone 2-4 in the previous season, and Harbaugh had neither beaten Ohio State nor finished a season with less than 3 losses.²⁸ Connor Stalions joined the team as a volunteer in 2021 and as a paid staff member in 2022.²⁹ Coincidentally, Stalions’ hiring coincided with an unprecedented turnaround for the team, which went 12-2 in 2021 and 13-1 in 2022, before going on to win it all in 2023 as 15-0, beating Ohio State each year.³⁰ I am not attempting to imply the only reason for this turnaround is due to Stalions and his alleged program; however, it is quite interesting how his illegal network of scouting coincides with the team’s seeming revival. While it may not be the sole cause of Michigan’s miraculous turnaround, it could easily have been a driving factor.

For those seeking to claim Stalions expertise of other teams’ signals couldn’t have impacted game results, I would suggest taking a look at the pictures of him on the Michigan

²¹ *Id.*

²² Ray-Ban Meta Wayfarer, META <https://www.meta.com/smart-glasses/wayfarer-matte-black-graphite-polar-gradient/>.

²³ Kevin Skiver, *Was Michigan Staffer Connor Stalions at CMU-Michigan State Game? What Jim McElwain Said*, DETROIT FREE PRESS (Nov. 1, 2023) <https://www.dispatch.com/story/sports/college/2023/11/01/jim-mcelwain-photo-connor-stalions-central-michigan-sideline-michigan-state/71407741007/>.

²⁴ Connor Earegood, *Central Michigan Determining Whether Connor Stalions Appeared on Sideline*, THE MICHIGAN DAILY (Nov. 1, 2023) <https://www.michigandaily.com/sports/football/central-michigan-determining-whether-connor-stalions-appeared-on-sideline/>.

²⁵ *Supra*, Note 9.

²⁶ NCAA Finds *No Connection Between Jim Harbaugh and Illegal Sign Stealing*, YAHOO SPORTS (Nov. 6, 2023) <https://sports.yahoo.com/yahoo-ncaa-finds-no-connection-220725959.html>.

²⁷ Brandon Brown, *The Latest on the Jim Harbaugh Situation*, WOLVERINE DIGEST (Dec. 7, 2020) <https://www.si.com/college/michigan/football/michigan-football-jim-harbaugh-nfl-job-fire-extension-coaching-carousel-wolverines-season-2020>.

²⁸ *Michigan Football Year-by-Year Results*, MGOBLUE.COM <https://mgoblue.com/sports/2017/6/16/michigan-football-year-by-year-results>.

²⁹ Mike Florio, *Wall Street Journal Delves into Former Michigan Staffer Connor Stalions*, NBCSPORTS.COM (Nov. 7, 2023) <https://www.nbcsports.com/nfl/profootballtalk/rumor-mill/news/wall-street-journal-delves-into-former-michigan-staffer-connor-stalions>.

³⁰ *Supra*, Note 30.

sideline in the game against Ohio State in 2022.³¹ Notably, he stands next to Michigan defensive coordinator (and defensive play-caller) Jesse Minter when Ohio State's offense had the ball, and then next to Michigan offensive coordinator (and offensive play-caller) Sherrone Moore when the Ohio State defense was on the field.³² Holding an extensive stack of papers in his hands, Stalions was even recorded observing the Ohio State sideline prior to a play, before then pointing up several times.³³ The next play was a 4-yard pass for a touchdown.³⁴ Conclusions can be left to the reader and the NCAA, who have still yet to rule finally on the alleged violations.³⁵ While I and many others might continue to question the actions of Michigan which they deem coincidental and irrelevant, we are left waiting to hear how college football's governing body will rule on their sport's national champion.

³¹ Chris Rosvoglou, Photos Show Suspended Michigan Staffer In Special Place On Sideline At Ohio State, THE SPUN.COM (Oct. 24, 2023) <https://thespun.com/big-ten/michigan-wolverines/photos-show-suspended-michigan-staffer-connor-stalions-in-special-place-on-sideline>.

³² *Id.*

³³ 10TV Web Staff, et al., Video Appears to Show Suspended Michigan Staffer on Sidelines of 2022 Game Against Ohio State, 10TV.COM (Oct. 24, 2023) <https://www.10tv.com/article/sports/michigan-staffer-connor-stalions-video-sidelines-2022-ohio-state-michigan-game/530-8e72838f-ac44-46cb-9e91-a55ce429b315>.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ James Parks, NCAA Boss Makes Decision on if Michigan's National Title is Legit, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (Jan. 11, 2023), <https://www.si.com/fannation/college/cfb-hq/ncaa-football/michigan-football-national-championship-ncaa-president-comments>.