



Dave Houle  
as a Spartan

Mark Nichols  
during his MSU days

Jeff Wiska  
with the Drive

## Grid trio adjusts to life after football

**T**HEY STILL stand out in a crowd. Hard not to. While all three are down from their football playing weight, they are still plenty big. They share other similarities. During their playing days, they were intimidating in appearance — particularly Dave Houle, a massive 6-foot-4, 285-pound offensive tackle at Michigan State, a man with hips bigger than almost anyone else's thighs, sporting a Fu-Manchu mustache and crewcut.

That's intimidation defined. Now, Houle and two other former Spartans, Mark Nichols and Jeff Wiska, look like most other young businessmen in their sport coats and ties and neat and trim hairstyles. The only clues to their previous vocations are their still-imposing frames and the rings they wear.

Houle and Nichols flash huge Rose Bowl rings, from MSU's 1988 championship team. Wiska sports a pair of enormous rings, one advertising a Big Ten championship, the other commemorating last year's Arena Football title with the Detroit Drive.

But all that's just surface stuff. These are three guys who went to MSU to play football, then got a degree. In that order. Once accomplished, their first thoughts regarding a career were of pro football, not anything utilizing their classroom education.

All three are trying to readjust to life without football. For different reasons, chances are slim that any of them will ever play again.

It is not an easy transition. "I can't watch it," Nichols said of the game he loves. "I just can't. I keep thinking I should be out there."

Houle, A GRADUATE of Plymouth Salem, was a project when he arrived at MSU in 1983. According to Nichols, his roommate for two years, Houle didn't weigh 200 pounds as an incoming freshman.

Five years later he was a monster on a championship team, with enough potential to be drafted by the New York Giants in the sixth round. But he paid a price for his impressive development.

"I can't do anything," said Houle. "I can't even run. The motion of my arms hurts my shoulders."

Houle then told an amusing deer-hunting story — but not your typical one-that-got-away tale. Seems Houle was trudging through the woods armed with a bow and, sure enough, there was a prime target only a few yards away. He readied his bow, realizing his aching shoulders might prevent him from even drawing the bowstring.

So what happens? "My shoulder popped," Houle said, laughing, "and it was so loud the deer heard it and ran away."

Funny, huh? But when the chuckling subsides and reality sinks in, the humor seems hollow. Injuries have made it almost impossible for this giant of a man to do anything athletic.

HIS WEIGHT is down to 255, and would be less if he could exercise. Houle had three shoulder operations (two on the right) while at MSU and, after training camp with the Giants, faces two more (one on each).

Houle hurt one shoulder, then the other, doing double-duty at center for the Giants after starter Bart Oates was hurt early in camp last summer. When Houle told his coaches he couldn't continue ("I couldn't lift my arms over my head"), they didn't believe him. So Houle left camp and went to see Dr. Herb Ross, the MSU team doctor.

"(Ross) said I couldn't play anymore," said Houle. The Giants still refused to believe him — until the week ago, when team scout Tom Bolintine called. Bolintine said the Giants agreed to pay for any surgery whether Houle returned or not, but if he could, they wanted him back.

Houle paid another visit to Ross, who again recommended retirement. When the Giants heard Ross' recommendation, they did an about-face and withdrew their offer to pay for surgery. The matter is destined for litigation.

"It's just amazing the kind of people I'm dealing with," he said. "People just don't believe teams will treat you that way."

AFTER HOULE left the Giants' camp, he said, "It was terrible. The first couple of days I went up to East Lansing and saw my girl friend. But I couldn't just sit there. I had to find something to do. I had been working 14 hours a day, then nothing."

Although he said college coaches "are trying to reverse it, I think it's still in the players' minds that they're majoring in football," Houle, who got a degree in communications, thought that way. "Football was number one, school number two," he said.

Example: The highlight for most college students is graduation day. Not for Houle.

What was important was pro football camp. Houle said that if he had to decide between school and football, he "would have gone to New York and blown off the last two weeks of school" — even if it meant not getting a



C.J.  
Risak

degree.

Times change. Houle is now in management training at Enterprise Car Rental and Leasing.

NICHOLS' EXPERIENCES are strikingly similar to Houle's. A Bloomfield Hills native who graduated from Birmingham Brother Rice in 1983, the defensive tackle came to MSU weighing 208 pounds. He bulked up to 265 as a senior and was drafted in the eighth round by the Pittsburgh Steelers.

But injuries ruined Nichols' chances, too. "I was in real good shape when I went to camp," he said. "But then we started running and my shins started bothering me. And then I started getting burners every hit I took."

Both were a recurrence of previous ailments. The burners — pinched nerves in his neck — were more serious. Nichols has been plagued by a cervical disc problem since he started playing at MSU. The more severe attacks would burn, then numb one side of his body.

"I've had my body put back together more than once," he said (he has also had two shoulder operations). "But when you start having neck problems, that's scary. There comes a point when you say, 'Hey, am I doing the most intelligent thing?'"

NICHOLS DECIDED continuing to play wasn't too smart. He left Pittsburgh's training camp after just two days. "It was a bummer," he said. "I went through quite a dry spell. I went out and looked for a job."

What was he trained for? His degree was in communications, but "when I went to State, I was on a mission to play pro football."

The difficulty adjusting to civilian life was about what you'd expect for a guy like Nichols, who relied on emotional intensity to succeed. He currently sells mortgages for First Security Savings.

"I don't get to hit anybody here," he said. "You can laugh, but in football you get to take out your aggressions. Suddenly, you can't do that anymore."

WISKA'S STORY is different. Indeed, as he described it, "My story's written. I've got nothing left to prove."

A Farmington Hills native, he came out of Detroit Catholic Central in 1978. By 1982, he had played on a Big Ten championship team (MSU was on probation and did not go to the Rose Bowl) and in a couple of college all-star games. He was drafted by the Giants, but injuries sidelined him.

Wiska resurfaced with the Michigan Panthers in the USFL. He stuck with them when they moved to Oakland. After the team folded, he played with the Cleveland Browns and, during the NFL strike, with the Miami Dolphins. His final professional stop was last year with the Drive, a decision that earned him a championship ring.

"It's a dream," Wiska said of playing pro ball. "But after a year or so, your perspective changes. In the business world, you're building toward a future. In athletics, it's almost the opposite."

In business, as a worker ages his value increases with experience; in sports, as an athlete ages his skills diminish and, ultimately, so does his worth.

"NO MATTER how great an athlete you are, there comes a day when you've got to go out in the real world," said Wiska. "It's time to use your brain."

Wiska's time has come. He is now employed as a sales representative for Ez-Lift Doors, and he likes it. "I was ultra-motivated to play football," he said. "I never was for anything else, until this job."

All three former Spartans share the belief that football served as a great teacher. "Nothing I ever did in school academically prepared me as well (for the working world)," claimed Nichols. "I wouldn't trade it for anything. People don't realize the preparation, the discipline that goes into football. I think the working world is a lot easier."

Houle: "If it wasn't for sports, I don't know if I would have gone to college."

Wiska: "Football is like getting a doctorate in success. The lessons, the discipline you learn are ingrained in your mind for the rest of your life. That's your edge right there."

Their time in the limelight as football demigods has passed, but the memories remain forever. The rings on their fingers, the lingering pain, the lessons learned will serve as constant reminders.

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## St. Mary's road woes continue

The road has not been kind to St. Mary's College of Orchard Lake.

The Eagles basketball team lost for the fifth time in a stretch of six straight road games, 119-105 Monday at Northwood Institute. It was a loss that should have been averted by a team aiming for an NAIA District 23 championship. St. Mary's is now 14-15 and ranked fourth in the district power-point rankings. Northwood is just 7-22, eighth in the rankings.

The Eagles had the lead, but folded down the stretch. Mike Urbanus, who led the Northmen with 27 points

and nine rebounds, put his team ahead for good, 98-94, with 3:14 left. Northwood led 56-53 at the half.

DESPITE ITS road woes, St. Mary's can still finish second in the district by winning its final three games. The Eagles need to win just one to be assured of fourth, which would guarantee them the home court for the first round of district play.

The top six teams in the power-point rankings qualify for the district playoffs; the top two teams earn a first-round bye.

Jerome Washburn led the Eagles against Northwood with 28 points and 10 boards. Jim Butcher scored 18 (on six three-pointers), Bob Bringham had 12 and James Curtis and Mike Moroney netted 10 apiece. Jeff Williams added 26 points for Northwood.

St. Mary's shot well (41-of-82 from the floor, 50 percent), but not as well as Northwood (43-of-82, 52.4 percent). The Eagles play at Madonna College at 8 p.m. tonight, then return home for games against Wayne State Monday and Siena Heights Saturday.