

Super receivers lead U-M

Edwards, Avant and Breaston may be best trio in the country

ANN ARBOR (AP) — No matter who's throwing the ball for Michigan this season, the Wolverines' passes will land in good hands.

In Braylon Edwards, Jason Avant and Steve Breaston, No. 8 Michigan may have the best trio of wide receivers in the country.

"It definitely makes it easier knowing we have guys that get open with a lot more space than average receivers," said Clayton Richard, one of the quarterbacks vying to replace departed starter John Navarre.

Purdue coach Joe Tiller called the threesome the best collection of receivers he had seen. Their teammates are just as impressed.

"There can't be better receivers out there, so I know I'm getting the best workout I can each day at practice," Michigan safety Ernest Shazor said. "Edwards can take over games with deep balls. Avant is always going to catch the ball, especially on third down. Breaston can break it at any time."

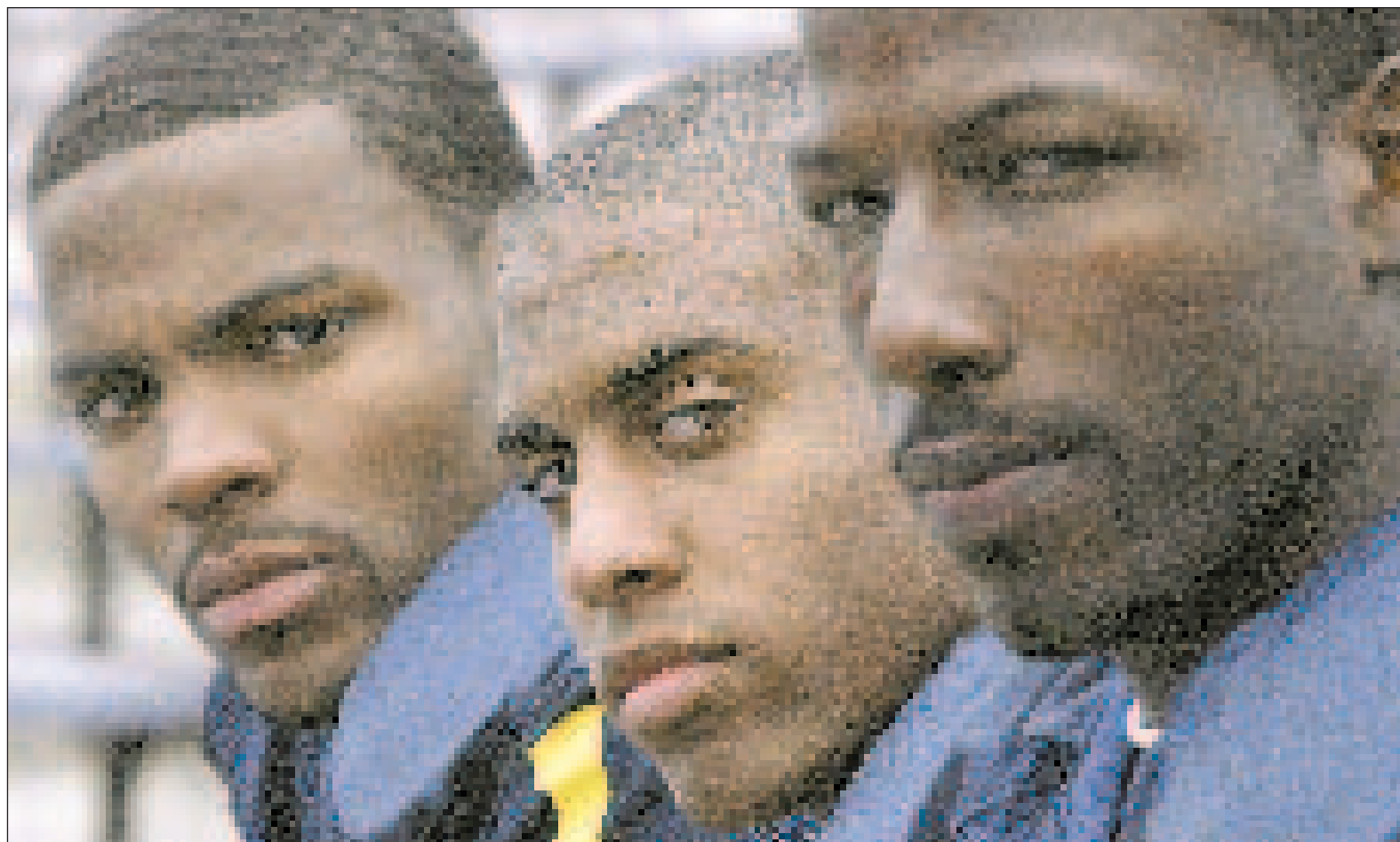
Michigan's reputation for having a conservative offense is as outdated as leather football helmets.

The Wolverines have thrown the ball so much over the past two decades that seven of their quarterbacks have landed on NFL teams. This season the receivers will have to break in a new quarterback — likely Matt Gutierrez, but perhaps Richard.

Last year, Edwards was first-team All-Big Ten, Avant was on the second team and Breaston was the co-Big Ten Freshman of the Year.

Edwards, the star of the group, caught 85 passes for 1,138 yards and a Big Ten-best 14 touchdowns last season.

Even though the 6-foot-3, 208-pounder likely would've been a first-round pick had he



U-M receivers (from left) Braylon Edwards, Steve Breaston and Jason Avant will be prime aerial targets.

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entered the NFL draft, Edwards returned to shoot for a national championship, break numerous school records and graduate. The son of former Michigan running back Stanley Edwards, he has 155 career receptions for 2,211 yards, including 10 100-yard games, and 24 TDs.

To break school marks in each category — held by Anthony Carter, Marquise Walker and David Terrell — he needs 22 catches, 860 yards, 14 TDs, five 100-yard games and a third 1,000-yard season.

Avant had 47 receptions for 772 yards and a team-high 16.4 yards per catch last season.

The sturdy 6-1, 203-pound junior caught a pass in all 12 games, even in the Rose Bowl, where he played with a sprained left knee and ankle. Avant caught 17 passes on third downs, and 16 of them were long enough to be first downs.

With his speed and moves, Breaston reminded many of former Wolverine Desmond Howard and ex-Notre Dame star Rocket Ismail as he accounted for more than 100 all-purpose yards in each game. With just 174 pounds on his 6-1 frame, he ran past defenders or slithered around them.

Breaston caught 38 passes for 444 yards, set a Michigan record with 619 yards on punt returns — 40 short of the Big Ten mark — and gained nearly 200 yards on kickoff returns.

And he was the first Wolverine since 1949 to score four ways in a season with three receiving TDs, two rushing, two on punt returns and one passing.

"You can't double all of us," Avant said. "So, at least one of us is going to get open. And when one of us gets open, look out."

Northwestern defensive

tackle Luis Castillo agreed with Tiller's lofty assessment of Michigan's receivers. Castillo saw one of the many spectacular plays they made last season when Avant made a one-handed touchdown catch against the Wildcats.

"And he's not even their top guy," Castillo said. "They're stacked."

When Michigan does run the ball, its receivers are eager to help.

"The thing about these guys that I really like is, they play as hard without the football as they do with it. They are devastating blockers," said Lloyd Carr, entering his 10th season as Michigan's head coach and 25th year on its staff.

Even with the loss of Navarre and tailback Chris Perry, a Heisman Trophy finalist, from last season's 10-win team that lost to USC in the Rose Bowl, Michigan is the Big Ten favorite heading

into the 2004 season.

Edwards isn't the only Michigan player who decided to delay an NFL career to return to Ann Arbor.

Cornerback Marlin Jackson and offensive lineman David Baas chose to return for their senior seasons, too. The secondary is almost as strong as the receiving corps with Jackson and Markus Curry at cornerback, and Shazor at safety.

Michigan opens its season Sept. 4 at home against Miami of Ohio and travels to Notre Dame the following week. The conference opener is against Iowa on Sept. 25 at home, and the 101st matchup with Ohio State on Nov. 20 on the road.

Edwards hopes the Wolverines end their season, and he ends his stellar career, on Jan. 4 at the Orange Bowl.

"With Miami being the site of the national championship game, that would be lovely to go down there," he said.