Three minutes and 36 seconds had elapsed in the 132nd Harvard-Yale game at the Yale Bowl, and the good work of the first eight weeks of the 2015 season was unraveling. The Crimson, which the previous week had lost to Penn (Harvard’s first defeat in 23 games), was in a 7-0 hole thanks to a 28-yard touchdown pass—on fourth down and 12, no less—from the Bulldogs’ impressive quarterback, Morgan Roberts, to his superb receiver Christopher Williams-Lopez. Meanwhile, Dartmouth and Penn, with whom the Crimson was tied for the Ivy League lead, were both on their way to winning their season finales.

It took 53 seconds for equilibrium to be restored, courtesy of two of the damned-est players in recent Harvard football history. On third down from the Crimson 47, quarterback Scott Hosch ’16 dropped back and unfurled a long pass. Running deep downfield was wide receiver Justice Shelton-Mosley ’19, who had beaten Yale safety (and captain) Cole Champion. At first the ball appeared to be traveling too far for Shelton-Mosley to catch up to it. But at the last moment, he stretched his arms and snagged it, then ran into the end zone. When Kenny Smart ’18 booted the extra point, the game was tied—just like that.

With Hosch throwing four touchdown passes and Shelton-Mosley scoring thrice, the Crimson went on to win, 38-19. The victory was Harvard’s ninth straight over Yale—the longest streak in series history—and fourteenth in the last 15 years. The Crimson finished the season 9-1 and 6-1 in the Ivy League, earning a share of the title with Dartmouth and Penn. This was Harvard’s third title in a row (the first and third were shared) and seventeenth in the 60 years of Ivy competition. Though they couldn’t match the transcendent 10-0 record achieved in 2014, this year’s seniors—the class of 2016—depart with a four-year record of 36-4, tied for best in Ivy history with the mark achieved by Harvard’s class of 2015. As head coach Tim Murphy notes, the ’16ers can flaunt championship braggin’ rights over the ’15ers: “They had one more ring.”

For the 59-year-old coach (see “Murphy Time,” November-December 2015, page 35), who completed his twenty-second year on the Crimson sidelines, the victory at the Bowl was his seventeenth, the most by any coach in the hallowed series. The league title was his ninth. This also was his fifteenth straight season with seven or more victories. He concedes that the 35-25 loss to Penn at Harvard Stadium on November 17 had been a jolt. “I think that comes down to how high we set the bar,” he says. “But at the end of the day, when you win a championship and manage to beat your bitter rival for the ninth year in a row, I don’t think we could ask any more of our kids.”

Despite the efforts of Yale linebacker Victor Egu, Crimson quarterback Scott Hosch ’16 managed a flip to freshman receiver Justice Shelton-Mosley, who took the ball the rest of the way. The 35-yard touchdown gave Harvard a 14-7 second-quarter lead in The Game.
Two of those kids came in for special mention. Hosch was named first-team All-Ivy quarterback, New England Player of the Year, and Ivy Offensive Player of the Year. These accolades are especially remarkable considering that the native of Sugar Hill, Georgia, never went into pre-season practice as the team’s number-one quarterback: in 2014 he backed up Conner Hempel ’15, and last summer he was slotted behind Joseph Viviano ’17, who would miss the season because of a broken foot suffered before play began. Hosch is the latest Crimson star from the Peachtree State, a Georgia connection that includes running back Treavor Scales and quarterback Colton Chapple (both class of ’13), and safety Norman Hayes (the 2014 captain) and defensive end Zack Hodges, both from the class of ’15. This year, Hosch set the Harvard single-season passing record by tossing for 2,827 yards. His 22 touchdown passes were the second most for a single year in program history. (Chapple is first, with 24 in 2012.)

Hosch rarely made it look pretty. But you can’t gainsay the results: he was 15-1 as a starter. “Between his freshman and senior year, Scottie improved as much as any player we’ve ever had,” Murphy says. “His strengths are his intangibles. His discipline, motivation, and mental toughness are off the charts. His quiet, understated leadership, his ability to focus and produce under pressure—they were remarkable.” Murphy also cites Hosch’s continual improvement as a runner and, especially, as a passer. “At times teams had great coverage on us, and Scottie threw to the only place he could. If you watch the film every day like I did, he made 25 of those throws this year. You’d just shake your head and say, ‘Wow!’

The player with the largest Wow factor, though, was Shelton-Mosley, who was the unanimous choice as Ivy League Rookie of the Year. The spindly, five-foot-10 wideout from Sacramento, California, caught 40 passes on which he gained a healthy 14.7 yards per reception, scored eight touchdowns, and led the Ivies with an eye-popping average punt return of 19.0 yards. As Shelton-Mosley worked his shake-and-bake, Murphy was marveling from the sidelines. “When you have a threat like that, and people really have to concentrate on where he is on the field, it opens up opportunities for your other skill kids,” he says. “We didn’t understand until he got here how mature he was, how driven in a very understated way, how motivated he is. You put it all together and he made an impact that very few freshmen in our history have ever made.”

Shelton-Mosley “made an impact that very few freshmen in our history have ever made.”

For a stretch in the middle of the season, the 2015 Crimson was as dominating as any Harvard team ever. After opening with easy wins over Rhode Island, Brown (the proverbial Ocean State sweep), and Georgetown (see “Rolling Along,” November-December 2015, page 30), the Crimson went to Ithaca and rolled over Cornell 40-3. Traveling the next week to Easton, Pennsylvania, Harvard mashed overmatched Lafayette 42-0. That set up the next Ivy game, against Princeton at Harvard Stadium. The Tigers hung in there for a half. Then the Crimson scored on five consecutive possessions to turn a 7-7 tie into a 42-7 breather. Hosch threw for 437 yards (third-highest single-game total in Harvard history), 190 of which were amassed by redoubtable senior wideout/returner Andrew Fischer. On the day, the 175-pound Fischer—“One of the greatest big-game guys we’ve ever had,” says Murphy—reeled in 10 receptions and 255 all-purpose yards.

At this stage Harvard was clicking on all cylinders. Hosch’s passing was complemented by the ground-gaining of running back Paul Stanton Jr. The senior would finish the season leading the Ivies in rushing with 89.9 yards a game. Stanton had the benefit of being able to cut back through holes created by a prodigious line whose camshaft was three seniors: 300-pound tackle Cole Toner and two 290-pounders, Anthony Fabiano and Adam Redmond. This trio fiercely protected Hosch; the Crimson surrendered a mere 10 sacks all season.

At the same time, the Harvard defense was suffocating opposing offenses. This year’s unit saw its sacks total drop to 18 from 27 in 2014, when Hodges and line-mate Obum Obukwelu ’15 were terrorizing quarterbacks. But the crackerjack senior linebacking corps—among the most consistent Crimson units of recent memory—swallowed up ball-carriers. “They had a balancing skill set,” says Murphy. “There was a tough, physical captain in Matt Koran; a very athletic middle linebacker in Eric Medes; then you had Jake Lindsey, who could play the outside

Senior linebacker Jake Lindsey (51) wrapped up Cornell receiver Ben Rogers after a nine-yard gain on this play. The Crimson limited the Big Red to 112 yards through the air in its 40-3 win.
position and cover kicks." The defensive backfield, also senior-laden and keyed by cornerbacks Chris Evans and Sean Ahern, often set the tone with aggressive, hard-hitting coverage. Harvard did not allow a touchdown for more than 222 minutes of play, from the fourth quarter against Brown to the first quarter against Princeton.

Week 7 brought the gridiron version of That’s Incredible. Dartmouth invaded the Stadium for a Friday-night battle of undefeateds. Midway through the fourth quarter, Dartmouth was leading 13-0 and Harvard faced a fourth-and-12 from the Big Green 39. Hosch dropped back and saw wide receiver Seitu Smith II ’15 (’16) running down the left sideline on a pattern called “stutter and go.” Hosch threw, and at the left pylon Smith leaped, twisted his body—and made a magnificently acrobatic grab. Touchdown! Smart kicked the point. Dartmouth 13, Harvard 7. Hope floated. Moments later, Lindsey forced Big Green running back Ryder Stone to fumble. Koran recovered at the Crimson 49. Hosch then drove the Crimson half the length of the field in 11 plays—and just 2:16. On third and goal from the five, he rolled right, then saw Shelton-Mosley ’19 just over the goal line. The freshman "was like the third option," said Hosch. Hosch flipped, Mosley caught—his team-high ninth grab of the day, and his most important. When Smart kicked the point, it was, unbelievably, Harvard 14, Dartmouth 13. A last-ditch Big Green field-goal attempt was deflected by defensive tackle Stone Hart ’18. "We stole one today," admitted Murphy afterward.

The Crimson now held its fate in its hands. In New York City, Harvard escaped Columbia 24-16, thanks in part to Shelton-Mosley’s tackler-defying 86-yard punt return for a touchdown, a jaunt on which he squeezed through a tiny gap along the sideline. The next week, though, the team met its Waterloo. On a windy day at the Stadium, Penn and its quarterback, Alek Torgersen, shredded the Crimson for 192 yards and 21 points in the first period, then scored twice in the second half for a comeback win. Just as big a loss was the sidelining of Stanton, who suffered a torn ACL that finished his Harvard career. Stanton departs as the fourth-leading Crimson rusher of all time (2,906 yards), second in rushing touchdowns (36), and easily the best among the top 10 rushers in average yards per carry (6.0).

Against the Quakers, Harvard also wasted a touchdown pass thrown by the multiskilled Shelton-Mosley (off a reverse, to tight end Anthony Firkser ’17) and a routinely superb day by senior tight end Ben Braunecker, who had eight catches for 134 yards. Braunecker wound up as team leader with 48 receptions (eighth in the Ivies) for a stunning 17.7-yard average, best among the league’s top 10 receivers.

In New Haven the following week, Braunecker (six catches) was instrumental in helping the Crimson shrug off that defeat. The Game was won in the middle quarters, when the defense, led by Lindsey (team-high 11 tackles) kept the Elis off the scoreboard. In the second period the score was still 7-7, when, from the Yale 35, Hosch evaded the Bulldogs’ rush and flipped one over the middle to Shelton-Mosley, who dodged a defender, then cut to the left and...
beat everyone to the end-zone pylon. “He makes routine plays great,” Hosch said of the freshman. “He just catches that thing and makes 40 yards out of it.” Smart converted. Harvard 14, Yale 7. With just over five minutes left in the half, the Crimson went 89 yards in 11 plays. On third and four from the Yale 17, Hosch connected with Braunecker, running deep in the left corner of the end zone. “Scotty laid in a beautiful ball, and I clung [to it] for dear life,” said Braunecker. Smart booted. Harvard 21, Yale 7.

At the start of the second half, Harvard put the hammer down, ramming the ball 74 yards into the end zone. The touchdown came on a third-down, two-yard pass from Hosch to Braunecker, who bent down for the ball in the back right corner of the end zone. Smart again split the uprights. Harvard 28, Yale 7. Later, Smart booted a 40-yard field goal. The final Crimson touchdown came in the fourth quarter on a run in which Shelton-Mosley came from the right side, took the ball from Hosch, sliced through a hole, and cavorted eight yards to the left end-zone pylon. Smart punctuated.

The 2015 Game (the first under lights at the Bowl, putting the lux in Lux et Veritas) finished in darkness with Murphy getting a Gatorade shower from Koran and the Harvard Band tootling happily away. A three-peat—a satisfying one—had been secured.

Tidbits. Defensive back Sean Ahern ’16 (’17), of Cincinnati, Ohio, and Leverett House, was voted the 143rd captain of Harvard football. In 2015, the government concentrator had two blocked kicks and 34 tackles (the sixth most on the team), including 3.0 for a loss...Ahern was one of five Harvard unanimous selections for the all-Ivy first team; the others were tight end Ben Braunecker, offensive linemen Cole Turner and Anthony Fabiano, and running back Paul Stanton Jr. Four other players were first-team selections: quarterback Scott Hosch, offensive lineman Adam Redmond, return specialist Justice Shelton-Mosley, and linebacker Eric Medes. The Crimson placed 10 on the second team (including a second slot for Shelton-Mosley, at wide receiver)....The all-time record in The Game now stands at Yale 65 wins, Harvard 59 wins, and eight ties....The 2016 season will open at Harvard Stadium on Saturday, September 17, against Rhode Island.

—DICK FRIEDMAN