

2010 Big Ten Media Days: Day One observations (premium)

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CHICAGO, Ill. – It was an eventful first day here at the Hyatt Regency McCormick Place for the 2010 Big Ten Football Media Days. Talk of expansion dominated the headlines, and that is certainly something I will address in this post.

But there were also some other things I took away from being here on Monday, so I'm putting together a list of eight major observations I made. Some include news surrounding the Iowa Hawkeyes, other observations feature the rest of the Big Ten.

So without further ado, here are the eight observations:

1. Iowa being placed second makes sense

I talked to former Penn State quarterback Todd Blackledge on Monday, and he made mention of how he isn't a fan of preseason polls and doesn't think any polls should come out until the beginning of October. That is a statement I agree with 100 percent.

But since this is a business where we're asked to rank teams, the majority of the media here tabbed Ohio State as the preseason favorite to win the Big Ten again, with Iowa placed second and Wisconsin third.

This is precisely the order I had when I filled out my ballot back in June. I know some in the Hawkeye State might not agree with this assessment, but Ohio State has won at least a share of the last five straight Big Ten titles. Until proven otherwise, this is going to always be the team to beat in the Big Ten.

2. The summer fallout for a trio of Hawkeyes

When news came to light about two separate incidents this summer – one involving sophomore running back Jewel Hampton and junior cornerback Jordan Bernstine both being charged with public intoxication, the other involving junior defensive end Broderick Binns receiving a DUI – I was under the impression that all three would serve game suspensions. I figured Hampton's would be multiple games, Binns somewhere between 1-2 games, and Bernstine being suspended for one.

As it turned out, all three of these guesses were wrong.

On Monday, Ferentz announced that Binns and Hampton would both be suspended for the opener against Eastern Illinois on Sept. 4, and that was it. Bernstine will not be suspended from any game action.

In retrospect, this makes some sense. These incidents were the first time any of the three had ever been in trouble with the law. Hampton, in my opinion, deserved a harsher penalty for what took place in early June than Bernstine. What is significant here is that all three will be able to suit up for the Sept. 11 rivalry game against Iowa State. Considering how the Cyclones are coming off a win in the 2009 Insight Bowl last season, having the services of all three possibly for this game are big.

3. Norm Parker's supposed retirement

Earlier in the morning, Rob Howe of *Hawkeye Insider* tweeted that Iowa defensive coordinator Norm Parker would be stepping down from his position at the conclusion of this season. When Ferentz said Monday that this was news to him and that Parker had not said anything to him yet, many began to criticize Howe.

This is one instance where I feel compelled to stick up for Howe, and I will tell you why. Yes, maybe Parker hasn't gone

public with this decision, and maybe he hasn't said anything to Ferentz yet. But that doesn't mean he isn't contemplating it.

One thing Ferentz did reveal on Monday is that Parker will be coaching from the press box this season. That is important. Parker, who has diabetes and has had toes removed as of a result of the disease, is going to be coaching from the same area he coached the second half of last season.

For all we know, maybe Parker does retire at season's end. Again, it isn't as though Howe reported that Parker was retiring effective immediately. It wouldn't surprise me in the least if Parker does step down at season's end, but again, no one is really going to know anything on this front until the winter rolls around.

4. A ninth Big Ten game and how it would affect the Hawkeyes

In the midst of all the expansion talk and everything Big Ten commissioner Jim Delany discussed during his press conference Monday afternoon was something he said about adding a ninth game to the Big Ten schedule.

Now this was something that was discussed before Nebraska became a member of the Big Ten back on June 11, but considering that there were an odd number of teams, having an odd number of games would have been impossible.

However, with 12 teams, this can work. It's significant on a national scale because if the Big Ten decides to protect certain rivalries regardless of division format, that eliminates the notion that Michigan and Ohio State ought to be in the same division.</p>

Here's where Iowa comes into play – the annual non-conference game with Iowa State.

With the Big 12 dropping to 10 teams, it plans on playing a

round-robin schedule, much like the Pac-10's current structure before Colorado and Utah eventually compete in the conference. This would mean nine conference games for the Cyclones. Now, if both Iowa and Iowa State plays nine conference games, that dramatically affects this rivalry.

Either the rivalry can't be an annual event any more, or the teams can keep playing each other, and the rest of the non-conference schedule for both schools will be watered down. If Iowa plays a ninth Big Ten game, something Delany said he'd like to have accomplished in the next 2-4 years, keeping Iowa State means the home-and-homes against teams like Arizona and Pittsburgh are less likely to take place.

5. More on divisions

Another point Delany made Monday was that divisions are going to be determined in the next 30-45 days, and that it will most likely be East-West.

Before Delany started making the idea of nine conference games sound inevitable, I was vocal in saying that I believe the divisions should be split East-West with geography being true to form. This would have Iowa in a West division with Illinois, Minnesota, Nebraska, Northwestern, and Wisconsin.

Delany made clear he wants to protect rivalries. It's probably in the best interests of Iowa to be able to play Minnesota, Nebraska, and Wisconsin every season. The Hawkeyes already play for rivalry trophies against the Golden Gophers and Badgers, two teams that are currently protected rivalries on the schedule, and it only makes sense that Iowa plays Nebraska annually since Iowa is the only Big Ten state that even borders Nebraska.

The other revelation was that the competitive balance would be based off from 1993 on. This is the year Penn State joined the Big Ten. This is significant in this sense.

Since 1993, there have been 27 Big Ten champions in football (not factoring in tiebreakers). Ohio State, Michigan, Penn State, and Purdue (teams I had tabbed in the East) account for 18 of the 27 championships. The other nine are split between Wisconsin, Northwestern, Iowa, and Illinois. Factor in Nebraska, who has won five Big Eight/Big 12 titles in this timeframe, and it would be 18-14 in terms of championships going along the lines of a geographical split.

However the divisions eventually shake out, it would be a shame from the Hawkeyes' perspective if they can't play these three teams every season.

Delany also said divisions will likely only exist in the Big Ten for football. That's not to say it can't be done with a sport like basketball (the SEC does), but it would definitely be wise to leave this at football.

6. There will be a Big Ten championship game

This is big. The fact that in December of 2011, there will be a Big Ten championship game played somewhere in the Midwest.

From the sounds of things, Delany suggested that a decision on where this would be played isn't happening in the immediate future. But it will have to happen soon.

I personally believe the best option for this game is going to be Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis, an indoor stadium. It makes perfect sense because then something like weather can't affect the outcome of the game one way or the other.

And keep this in mind: Next season, Lucas Oil Stadium is slated to host Super Bowl XLVI, which would be played in February of 2012. If the talks of an NFL lockout next season come to fruition, and this gets affected, hosting the inaugural Big Ten championship game would help the city of Indianapolis recoup whatever would be lost on not being able to host the Super Bowl as a result of the NFL's possible work

stoppage.

7. Four coaches are clearly feeling the heat

None of them may have actually come out and said it, but in hearing Ron Zook, Rich Rodriguez, Bill Lynch, and Tim Brewster all speak on Monday, all four are going to need to win some games in order to stick around.

When Zook spoke, the first question asked was if he felt any pressure. The second question was if he felt relaxed. He answered yes to the latter. But let's not kid ourselves.

Zook said his team this year is as good as the one that went to the Rose Bowl three seasons ago. He is starting a redshirt freshman at quarterback, is coming off a 3-9 season, and Illinois has a daunting start to its season with four of its first six games against the likes of Missouri, Ohio State, Penn State, and Michigan State, with only the showdown against the Buckeyes happening at Memorial Stadium.

With Rodriguez, what amazed me was how he talked about the Ohio State game, as if it were like any other game. If this was not Michigan we were talking about here, I would dismiss this as coach speak.

He said he didn't think it mattered when the game is played. That may be fine and good, except when's the last time anyone can remember either Michigan or Ohio State ending its Big Ten slate with a different opponent? If you have an answer to this, let me know.

Lynch came out and said Indiana was 12 plays away from having a special season last year, and that may be true. After all, it was a pick-six by Iowa's Tyler Sash that changed the complexion of that game at Kinnick Stadium on Halloween.

The pressure is on in Bloomington. Looking at the Hoosiers' schedule, many expect Indiana to win all four of its non-

conference games. Its slate of games against Towson, Western Kentucky, Akron, and Arkansas State was described as the easiest in all of college football. Lose any of these games, and the Hoosiers are in trouble.

And then there's Brewster. Minnesota has gone to the Insight Bowl the last two seasons, and the Golden Gophers have a home schedule that any top 20 team would benefit from. Except Minnesota is not a top 20 team.

TCF Bank Stadium can only be such a talking point for so long. Brewster even proclaimed it as the best stadium in the Big Ten. Now I know he's biased, and I can appreciate his passion and loyalty to the school, but any objective reporter saying the same thing would have been mocked by everyone else at the Hyatt Regency.

Maybe these coaches find a way to get the job done and hold onto their jobs, but it's clear, the heat is on these four coaches.

8. Parity vs. Strength

My last observation has to do with distinguishing the difference between parity in the conference, and how strong the Big Ten appears to be.

Purdue head coach Danny Hope talked about the parity that exists in the Big Ten, which stems from programs such as his being able to knock off a team like Ohio State last season when many outsiders thought the Boilermakers would struggle.

While I don't think there's enough parity this season to suggest that anyone can win this conference, I do believe the Big Ten is a much stronger conference today than it was a season ago.

Maybe the 4-3 bowl record helps, with three of those wins coming from the projected top three teams. Considering that

the Big Ten was 1-6 in the bowl season prior, this is a major improvement.

On one hand, the Buckeyes, Hawkeyes, and Badgers are the only three teams I believe truly have a realistic shot at actually winning the Big Ten in 2010.

But much like the 2007 season, where there were 10 Big Ten teams that won six games and earned bowl eligibility, I think there could be a repeat of this again, this fall. I can see 8-9 teams that could end up being bowl eligible this season.

In addition to the "Big Three" for this season, I believe Penn State, Michigan State, Northwestern, and Purdue can all win anywhere between 7-9 games this season. Then from that lower tier, maybe two of those four find a way to six wins.

All this remains to be seen, but I really think this is something we could be talking about come the end of November when the bowl picture becomes clearer.

I don't expect all of you to agree with everything that I said. But I hope you enjoyed some of this insight I managed to take away from being at this first day. I will have a similar post up on Tuesday after getting the opportunity to speak to players from each of the 11 teams represented here in Chicago.