

8/30/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 1 (premium)

Every Monday, we will be running a weekly series titled "State of the Big Ten," which will be made available to all members of HawkeyeDrive.com. This series of columns will focus on one major headline regarding the conference and go in-depth on the subject at hand.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

With all the news regarding Nebraska joining the Big Ten in 2011 and how divisions are going to be divided once the conference expands to 12 teams, the Big Ten appears to be at a crossroads.

A topic that will be brought up heavily over the course of the next couple of weeks is scheduling. With the college football season officially starting in three days, this is a good time to explore one component of scheduling that may start to evolve in the Big Ten.

Three teams – Indiana, Minnesota, and No. 2 Ohio State – open their seasons Thursday night. Now, the Golden Gophers are playing at Middle Tennessee State. But both the Hoosiers and Buckeyes are playing at home. Indiana plays host to Towson, while Ohio State welcomes Marshall to The Horseshoe.

It should be noted that the Hoosiers opened their 2009 season with a home game on a Thursday night against Eastern Kentucky. But now with the Buckeyes also taking part in starting their home slate two days earlier than normal, the trend of games featuring Big Ten teams being played on Thursdays might just continue to evolve.

Right now, the Big Ten does not feature its conference games played on a day other than Saturday. In fact, it is the only BCS conference that is not doing this in 2010. Once the Cornhuskers join the Big Ten and give it 12 teams, there is no reason to think this would not change over time.

Here are five different Thursday night games that will air on ESPN this fall: Sept. 9 – Auburn at Mississippi State (SEC), Sept. 30 – Texas A&M at Oklahoma State (Big 12), Oct. 14 – South Florida at West Virginia (Big East), Oct. 21 – UCLA at Oregon (Pac-10), Oct. 28 – Florida State at North Carolina State (ACC).

In addition, on Oct. 7, Big Ten newcomer Nebraska will be playing a Big 12 game at Kansas State.

Granted, all of these are games airing on ESPN. But look at how all of the other BCS conferences are involved.

Even with the Big Ten Network, which launched three years ago today, this is something that could start happening on Thursdays. Not just the first week of September, but during the middle of the season when conference games are played.

Now consider all the hoopla the past couple of weeks about Michigan and Ohio State possibly being put into separate divisions and moving up “The Game” to the middle of the season.

Imagine the build-up if those two things happen, and the game is scheduled prime time for a Thursday night on ESPN or the Big Ten Network. Think of the exposure both teams would get. Think of how that would be the one sporting event in the spotlight that evening.

This thought has to be in the minds of those who support the idea of splitting the two up.

Before sweeping this idea under the rug, consider that

Michigan is playing Notre Dame next season in the first-ever night game played at The Big House. In addition to that, consider that Ohio State is opening its 2010 season this Thursday night.

In a day and age where the almighty dollar is the biggest factor in play, having "The Game" on a Thursday night in October suddenly does not appear as far-fetched.

Now picture other Big Ten venues, like Beaver Stadium in State College, Pa. If Penn State had a Thursday night home game against someone like Ohio State, Nebraska, or even Iowa, that would have "WhiteHouse" written all over it.

Or how about Camp Randall Stadium in Madison, Wis.? Or even Kinnick Stadium in Iowa City, Iowa? Those environments are already insane for night games. One could only imagine what those stadiums would be like if they hosted a nationally televised Thursday night contest.

Last year, Nebraska athletics director Tom Osborne told NET Television the Cornhuskers were looking into having a Thursday night game at Memorial Stadium in 2010 (Nebraska does not have one this season, however). He mentioned a plus being the football team's preparation with having a bye week the week before, plus two extra days to prepare for the following opponent after that Thursday game.

With the season now going beyond Thanksgiving, as well as having an even number of Big Ten teams starting in 2011, this can be possible when putting future schedules together.

Maybe the Big Ten does not start scheduling Thursday games in 2011, or even 2012. It might even wait until the nine-game conference schedule is in place.

However, this is something that is more likely than not on the horizon for this conference. Seeing how other major conferences already do this, it is not crazy to think the Big

Ten would not consider this.

With all the rapid change happening in the Big Ten right now, this idea is something fans should think about and probably prepare themselves for.