

# 10/4/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 6 (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

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One week into conference play, and the Big Ten now has four teams – No. 18 Michigan, No. 17 Michigan State, Northwestern, and No. 2 Ohio State – that all remain undefeated.

A lot is made nationally about the starts about both the Buckeyes and Wolverines. Ohio State has basically lived up to its hype as a national title contender through five weeks, even though the Buckeyes received a bit of a scare in their 24-13 win at Illinois on Oct. 12. Michigan, on the other hand, has a quarterback in Denard Robinson that is stealing headlines week after week and has slowly become perhaps the best athlete in all of college football.

But it's these other two 5-0 squads that are intriguing, and perhaps the rest of the country should be taking notice.

Michigan State and Northwestern may not have the tradition of an Ohio State or Michigan, but that shouldn't take away from the accomplishments of either program this season. In fact, the argument could be made for both the Spartans and Wildcats that it was only a matter of time before this happened.

Mark Dantonio and Pat Fitzgerald are solid Big Ten coaches, and to be honest, neither really receives the praise they both

clearly deserve. Both have worked wonders to get their programs to this point.

Let's start with Dantonio, who is in his fourth season at Michigan State. When he first arrived in East Lansing, Mich., that football program was a train wreck. It was as if The Titanic hit the iceberg when that 2006 version of the Spartans absolutely unraveled in a nationally televised home game against Notre Dame. Aside from a miracle comeback win at Northwestern that season, Michigan State was just in shambles.

Dantonio came in, and during his first season, there were incredibly low expectations nationally. So what does he do? Dantonio guides the Spartans to a 7-5 season and a trip to the Champs Sports Bowl against Boston College. In fact, Michigan State has been in a bowl game every year under Dantonio.

Last season may have been a forgettable one in East Lansing, but that never should have carried any weight when looking at this season.

Folks, this Michigan State team has played like one that should be ranked 17th in the country, and maybe even higher. Even with Dantonio dealing with health issues, this team has found a way to win big games.

Just hours before Dantonio suffered his heart attack, he made the gutsy fake field-goal call that wound up paying off in a 34-31 win over Notre Dame. Then with him in the hospital this past week after suffering a setback, Michigan State beat Wisconsin at home 34-24.

It's obvious that this group of Spartan players are feeding off of Dantonio positively, and that's what makes this team so scary entering the second half of the season. That, and the fact that Ohio State is absent from its schedule.

Ironically, this week's game at "The Big House" falls on the 11th anniversary of the last time both Michigan and Michigan

State faced each other with identical 5-0 records. On Oct. 9, 1999, the Spartans defeated the Wolverines at Spartan Stadium, 34-31.

A third straight win for the Spartans over their in-state rival could potentially lead to a showdown of epic proportions later this month.

Which leads to the perfect spot to discuss Fitzgerald, who is in his fifth season as Northwestern's head coach.

It has been well-documented how purple is in Fitzgerald's blood, between being an all-American linebacker for the Wildcats and now being the face of that program. He took over under extreme conditions with the sudden death of Randy Walker in 2006. Through all the adversity, Fitzgerald has made Northwestern a very respectable program in the conference.

Like Michigan State, Northwestern also possesses a 5-0 record heading into its home game this week against Purdue, who is just reeling right now.

Also like the Spartans, the Wildcats dodge Ohio State this season. In fact, Northwestern dodges both the Buckeyes and the Michigan Wolverines, that other undefeated Big Ten team.

Looks like a pretty good year for this to happen.

The Wildcats' 29-28 win over Minnesota last weekend might have been ugly, but it doesn't matter. It's still a win. Northwestern has found ways to win close games time after time, and that is a direct reflection of what Fitzgerald has done to revive the culture surrounding the Wildcats and their fans.

With a bye coming up next week, a victory over the Boilermakers on Oct. 9 would have Northwestern bowl-eligible for the third straight season. This, by the way, has NEVER happened in that program's history. Ever.

Circle the date of Oct. 23. That day, there's a chance Dantonio brings his 7-0 Spartans to Ryan Field in Evanston, Ill., for a game of epic proportions against Fitzgerald and his 6-0 Wildcats.

7-0 Michigan State vs. 6-0 Northwestern. Let that thought sink in for a minute.

It's time to acknowledge the following: As long as Dantonio and Fitzgerald are in their current positions, Michigan State and Northwestern are two Big Ten programs to be reckoned with, both now, and in the seasons to come.