

11/1/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 10 (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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The month of November is here, and after Iowa defeated Michigan State last weekend, 37-6, the Big Ten championship race is suddenly one of the most intriguing headlines right now in college football.

Four teams – No. 7 Wisconsin, No.8 Ohio State, No. 15 Iowa, and No. 16 Michigan State – are all tied in the loss column with one apiece. The crazy part of this is that while all four teams each control their destiny for a share of the Big Ten crown, none of them currently control their destiny for a berth in the Rose Bowl, or any BCS bowl game for that matter.

Assuming none of these four teams lose in the next couple of weeks, either the Buckeyes or Hawkeyes will be eliminated from the race after they meet on Nov. 20 at Kinnick Stadium in Iowa City. That game is easily the biggest during this final four-week stretch of Big Ten play.

Iowa (6-2, 3-1) appears on paper to have the toughest schedule of this quartet of contenders. That showdown against Ohio State is the only home game remaining for the Hawkeyes, while they still have three road games at Indiana, Northwestern, and Minnesota remaining. Keep in mind that the Wildcats have won two straight over Iowa, and four of the last five meetings

they've had with the Hawkeyes.

For Iowa to earn a berth in Pasadena, it is pretty simple. The Hawkeyes would need to win all four of their remaining games, and have Wisconsin lose one of its final four contests since the Badgers won head-to-head 31-30 back on Oct. 23.

Meanwhile, the Buckeyes (8-1, 4-1) have their bye this week, and have home games with Penn State and Michigan remaining in addition to the showdown in Iowa City. Ohio State has the most difficult scenario to decipher because it will all depend on how the final BCS rankings look on Dec. 5. The Buckeyes already lost to Wisconsin, 31-18, and do not play Michigan State this season.

Unless Wisconsin were to stumble sometime in November, Ohio State's only shot at Pasadena would be to win its final three games and hope Michigan State wins out as well, creating a three-way tie. If this were to happen, the Buckeyes could get the Big Ten's BCS bid if they finish higher in the final BCS standings than both an 11-1 Wisconsin and 11-1 Michigan State.

Although the Spartans (8-1, 4-1) are coming off their first loss of the season, their chances of going to Pasadena remain strong. The scenario for Michigan State to make its first Rose Bowl in 23 years would need the following to happen: The Spartans would have to win out, then hope Iowa beats Ohio State and eliminates the Buckeyes, and for the Badgers to win out as well. Michigan State beat Wisconsin 34-24 on Oct. 2, and that would be the deciding factor if they both finish 11-1 and Iowa is 10-2, because the Hawkeyes' loss to Arizona on Sept. 18 would prevent their win over the Spartans last weekend from coming into play.

Michigan State's November schedule includes two straight home games against Minnesota and Purdue with a bye week in between, and then a trip to State College, Pa., to play Penn State in the regular season finale.

Finally, there's Wisconsin (7-1, 3-1), who probably has the best chance right now of playing in the Rose Bowl. The Badgers would need to win their four remaining games and get to 11-1. If this happens, the Badgers go to Pasadena if either Michigan State loses one of its final three games, or if the Spartans win out, if Ohio State also wins out and Wisconsin remains ahead of the Buckeyes in the final BCS standings.

If Iowa were to beat Ohio State, then the Badgers would need the Spartans to lose one more game, otherwise Michigan State holds the head-to-head tiebreaker on Wisconsin.

As complicated as all of this sounds, here is what does seem clear: On Jan. 1, 2011, one of these four teams will represent the Big Ten in Pasadena, Calif. If all four teams continue to win over the next two weeks, the picture will be more in focus on Nov. 20 after Iowa and Ohio State play.

It also seems likely the Big Ten gets a second BCS team that goes to either the Sugar Bowl on Jan. 4 in New Orleans, La., or the Orange Bowl on Jan. 3 in Miami, Fla. If this does happen, then the Capital One and Outback Bowls are there for whoever from this group of four remains leftover.

And if the worst-case scenario is a trip to Tampa, Fla., to play in the Outback Bowl against a beatable SEC opponent, that does not sound too awful.

In the final season before a Big Ten championship game decides everything, this title race is going to be memorable, one way or another.