

# 11/8/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 11 (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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A few weeks back, homage was paid the direction of Ohio State head coach Jim Tressel after he won his 100th career game at the Buckeye helm.

Last weekend in State College, Pa., history was made when legendary Penn State head coach Joe Paterno earned his 400th career coaching victory after the Nittany Lions defeated Northwestern, 35-21. Paterno became the first Division-I head coach ever to reach this plateau, and it would be foolish to not recognize this feat for what it is – remarkable.

Not only does he have 400 wins as a college football head coach, but all of them have come at Penn State.

Paterno first took over in 1966. To put this into a football perspective, his first season as Penn State's coach happened to be the first NFL/AFL seasons that the two leagues would decide a world champion in a game against one another that has taken on a life of its own as the "Super Bowl."

Throughout his tenure at Penn State, there have been nine U.S. presidents, including current commander-in-chief Barack Obama. Simply put, there aren't many people at his age that can still do their jobs as well as Paterno has done his.

He has coached the Nittany Lions to two national championships, one of which came during the 1986 season after a stunning Fiesta Bowl win over Miami (Fla.). Since Penn State officially began competing in the Big Ten back in 1993, it has won the conference three times, most recently in 2008. Entering the school's 18th season in the Big Ten, Paterno has taken the Nittany Lions to two Rose Bowls, a Fiesta Bowl, and an Orange Bowl. Penn State has won three of those four marquee games, one of which capped a perfect 12-0 season in 1994. He also won a Sugar Bowl back when Penn State was still an independent, and a Cotton Bowl back when that was considered an elite bowl game.

But perhaps the one trait that stands out about Paterno is that nothing negative (at least publicly) seems to be said about the way he coaches or about his reputation or Penn State's reputation as a football program.

This is worth bringing up considering how programs like SMU, Auburn, Florida State, USC, etc., have all during this time been forced to vacate wins and were put on probation, preventing them from playing in bowls (USC is currently serving this now). Paterno has never been forced to vacate a single one of his 400 victories. Penn State has never been on probation, never received a punishment of not being allowed to play in a bowl. Everything Paterno's program has done through his tenure has been decided on the field, where it should be decided.

What makes a moment like what was witnessed inside Beaver Stadium two days ago even more special was how it was done. Consider that Penn State was trailing Northwestern 21-0 with under a minute remaining in the first half. The Wildcats managed to suck any life out of the 100,000-plus fans who attended.

But the Nittany Lions never quit. They were able to march 91 yards down the field in 53 seconds, and scored their first

touchdown of the game right before halftime. From there, Penn State managed to open the floodgates.

With the first possession of the second half, the Nittany Lions scored another touchdown. Suddenly, what was a 21-point Northwestern lead was trimmed to single digits. Then Penn State's defense began to click, forcing 3-and-outs. It was the perfect storm for a comeback win.

The victory tied the largest deficit overcome by a Paterno-coached team – down 21-0 at Illinois during Penn State's magical 1994 season only to come from behind and win, 35-31. That was on the road. This was at home.

This win made Penn State bowl-eligible for the sixth consecutive year, a streak dating back to when the Nittany Lions won the Big Ten in 2005.

Finally, consider the opponent. Northwestern, a team with a coach in Pat Fitzgerald that many view as the second coming of Paterno (well, sort of) in terms of potential longevity with one program. If those predictions ever do come to fruition, this 400th win for Paterno becomes more and more memorable long after he is gone.

Right now, the odds of that actually happening are slim, but who knows? All that matters today is that there is one head coach in college football who has not only done more for his school than anyone else, but perhaps more for the sport of college football than anyone else.

That man is Joe Paterno.