

11/15/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 12 (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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This is an interesting week in the Big Ten, to say the least.

It almost seems rare that every Big Ten football game on a given Saturday afternoon in the fall can have some sort of significant storyline to it, but that is exactly the case on Nov. 20. Not only are the three remaining conference title contenders all playing in separate games, but there are two other intriguing match-ups taking place.

At 11 a.m. Central on the Big Ten Network, Penn State plays Indiana. The reason why this game is interesting is because it was supposed to be a home game for the Hoosiers. However, an agreement was made back in September of 2009 that allowed Indiana to move this home game to FedEx Field, which is the home of the NFL's Washington Redskins.

While this is not the first time Indiana has moved a home game against Penn State to a different locale (the Hoosiers and Nittany Lions played at the RCA Dome in Indianapolis back in 2000), what makes this so unusual is that by moving this game to Landover, Md., which according to Mapquest is approximately 211 miles from Penn State's campus.

In other words, this is virtually going to be a home game for

the Nittany Lions, even if the logo at midfield and the end zones prove to suggest otherwise.

Then there is an even more fascinating scene in Big Ten football this weekend when Illinois and Northwestern battle one another in a 2:30 p.m. Central game on ESPNU. This game was originally supposed to be played at Northwestern. But instead of playing at Ryan Field in Evanston, the Wildcats and Fighting Illini are going to play each other on Nov. 20 in Chicago ... at Wrigley Field.

Yes, Wrigley Field, where the Chicago Cubs play baseball. Now there was a time when the Chicago Bears played their games at "The Friendly Confines," but they've resided at Soldier Field since the 1971.

This marks the first college football game there since 1938 (coincidentally, a year the Cubs went to the World Series) and the first football game of any kind in 40 years.

Now while Indiana's decision to move its Penn State game from Bloomington to Landover was purely a decision revolving around money, there's more to this Wrigley Field gimmick for Northwestern, a program that has really tried to market itself as "Chicago's Big Ten team" given Evanston's proximity to The Windy City.

This move has potential to pay off for the Wildcats. ESPN decided to have "College GameDay" air from outside Wrigley Field, meaning that Northwestern is going to receive perhaps even more national exposure than it initially bargained for by doing this. Add to it that this game comes against an in-state rival in Illinois, and surely one can expect there to be plenty of orange mixed in with the purple and white expected to be on hand this weekend on Chicago's North Side.

Looking at the big picture, it is understandable when someone suggests that neither Memorial Stadium in Bloomington or Ryan Field in Evanston have the same sort of atmosphere that a

place like Kinnick Stadium, Camp Randall Stadium, Beaver Stadium, The Horseshoe or The Big House have. But at the same time, Indiana and Northwestern are two football programs who, like this or not, believe playing these off-campus home games are in their best interests long-term.

Maybe they are. Maybe Indiana believes the \$3 million it is getting for moving its game with Penn State to the nation's capital is going to pay huge dividends for its athletics department. Maybe Northwestern believes it will have more of a local appeal in athletics, specifically football, by playing its home game against an in-state rival inside one of the oldest baseball stadiums there is in this country.

Either way, it will be interesting to see how these two specific situations unfold, in addition to the current Big Ten race right now between No. 11 Michigan State, No. 8 Ohio State, and No. 6 Wisconsin.