

COMMENTARY: Bowl picture getting bleak (premium)

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MINNEAPOLIS, Minn. – With a 27-24 loss to Minnesota comes a bowl scenario becoming cloudier and cloudier for the Iowa Hawkeyes with each waking minute.

It almost seems hard to believe that three weeks ago, there was actually talk surrounding this team possibly performing well enough down the stretch to play in a BCS bowl should Big Ten tiebreakers not go their way if the Hawkeyes were a part of the championship picture.

Yet here is an Iowa team that is 7-5, a record even the most pessimistic Hawkeye fans couldn't have envisioned when the 2010 season began.

If there is any good news for Iowa, it's that the bowl game that was the best-case scenario entering Saturday's contest against Minnesota is still on the table in the Outback Bowl, which would be played on New Year's Day in Tampa, Fla.

But with that being said, the Hawkeyes are now one of four teams at the moment in the Big Ten with 7-5 overall records. Illinois could become the fifth team to reach 7-5 should it defeat Fresno State on Dec. 3. As a direct result, bowl games that no one could have pictured Iowa heading to when the season began are now suddenly in the discussion.

The important point of emphasis here is that when it comes to bowls such as the Outback, Gator, Insight, Texas, and TicketCity, head-to-head isn't as important as how many fans will travel, how many people will tune in to watch on TV, or

who the opponent from the other conference is.

This is why even with victories back in October over other 7-5 Big Ten teams such as Penn State and Michigan, both of those teams could conceivably be selected ahead of the Hawkeyes in the bowl-pecking order now. The Nittany Lions are always going to have "The JoePa Factor" to their advantage until the day comes that he really isn't coaching, while the Wolverines are bowling again for the first time in 2007, when Michigan was completing its run of the most consecutive bowl appearances made by a single school.

Suddenly, the ballyhooed New Year's Day bowls in Tampa and Jacksonville, Fla., respectively, could be out of the question. Now the Insight Bowl, which is played on Dec. 28 in Tempe, Ariz., would probably like to take the Hawkeyes if they are still sitting there given the number of Iowa fans who reside in the Phoenix area.

But with that being said, Iowa has already made a trip to Tucson, Ariz., this season when the Hawkeyes lost to the Arizona Wildcats 34-27 on Sept. 18. That is something that could factor into the decision-making because fans might be reluctant about making a second trip to the desert over a four-month span. The competition for these games would be Illinois and Northwestern, and like it or not, there are just as many Chicago "snowbirds" in Arizona as there are Iowa, perhaps more.

Now the odds of Iowa slipping in the bowl order all the way to the Texas Bowl on Dec. 29 in Houston may seem a bit far-fetched. But again, when 7-5 is the record of discussion and not say 9-3 or 10-2, this is perhaps the best Iowa could hope for at this point.

The Hawkeyes have no one to blame but themselves for the predicament they now face, but everything that will be decided over the next week is beyond their control.

Now it's simply a waiting game, one that fans and media alike don't enjoy, especially when airfare between Christmas and New Year's seems to increase by the hour.

It will be interesting to see where this team goes now. It will also be interesting to see how the fans respond.