

# 11/29/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 14 (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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At this time last year, the Big Ten was dealing with a national image problem in the world of college basketball. The Big Ten/ACC Challenge had been in existence for 10 years, with the ACC dominating every season.

It took 11 attempts, but the Big Ten finally got the upper-hand in 2009. The accomplishment gained the conference some real positive exposure on a national level, and this has led to the high expectations surrounding the Big Ten today.

To be quite honest, there is no reason the Big Ten should not be able to win this for the second year in a row.

This year's edition of the Big Ten/ACC Challenge begins tonight in Minneapolis, Minn., when the Minnesota Golden Gophers host the Virginia Cavaliers. With this game being at "The Barn," Minnesota should be able to handle business.

On Tuesday, there are five match-ups, three of which the Big Ten ought to be favored in. The key games for the conference will be Northwestern hosting a reeling Georgia Tech squad, Ohio State traveling to play a Florida State team it beat at Value City Arena last year, and Illinois playing host to a North Carolina team that has already been beaten by Minnesota

this season.

Other games on Tuesday include the Iowa Hawkeyes playing at Wake Forest, and Michigan playing Clemson two seasons after beating the Tigers in the NCAA Tournament.

Then on Dec. 1, there are five more games. Two contests where the Big Ten should be favored are Wisconsin playing at home against North Carolina State (this coming one season after beating Duke at the Kohl Center), and Purdue traveling to Blacksburg, Va., to play Virginia Tech. Rounding out this year's Challenge are Indiana playing at Boston College and Penn State playing host to an old rival from its pre-Big 10 days, Maryland.

Oh, and a game at Cameron Indoor Stadium in Durham, N.C., featuring defending national champion Duke and Michigan State, who was ranked second nationally before losing to Connecticut last week at the Maui Invitational, and has been a Final Four participant in each of the past two seasons.

The opportunity is right there for the picking as far as the Big Ten is concerned. It will be favored in at least six of these 11 games over the course of the next three days. There is no reason to think the Big Ten's run does not continue.

Here are the ramifications from a national perspective – better the ACC again this year, and no one will be disputing whether the Big Ten is the best conference in college hoops this season. Between the Golden Gophers' success in Puerto Rico earlier this month, the Badgers' run at the Old Spice Classic in Orlando, Fla., over Thanksgiving weekend, and the success of teams early on like Ohio State, this conference has plenty of fire power in 2010-11.

As stated before on this site and by numerous other outlets that follow the conference closely, there are six teams in the Big Ten right now that appear to be locks for the 2011 NCAA Tournament in Ohio State, Michigan State, Illinois, Minnesota,

Purdue, and Wisconsin. Barring major collapses in conference play by any of these six, the thought of one of these teams not dancing this March seems ridiculous.

Lose this year's Big Ten/ACC Challenge, however, and the same problems that existed before will rear their ugly heads once again. All the talk about the Big Ten being subpar to conferences like the ACC, the Big East, and the Big 12. This is what lies ahead if the conference struggles on the court over these next few days.

The bottom line is that in college sports, perception is reality, whether people like it or not. If a conference is perceived to be bad or at least not good – which is exactly what some thought of the Big Ten as recently as two years ago – the stigma sticks, even if the statement being made is exaggerated. The conference has dealt with the same problems on the gridiron as well in recent years.

Again, this week has potential for the Big Ten to make a giant statement to the Dick Vitales of the world. Show again on the hardwood that it is better than the ACC, and the praise for the Big Ten will continue throughout the season until no one from the conference remains in the NCAA Tournament.

Really, it is that simple.