

12/6/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 15 (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.

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On Dec. 5, all 35 bowl match-ups were announced. This year, the Big Ten is sending eight teams – Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Michigan State, Northwestern, Ohio State, Penn State, and Wisconsin – to bowl games.

Even more impressive is that for the sixth consecutive season, the conference earned itself two BCS bowl bids as the fourth-ranked Badgers are in Pasadena, Calif., to play No. 3 TCU in the 2011 Rose Bowl on New Year's Day, while the sixth-ranked Buckeyes meet No. 8 Arkansas on Jan. 4 at the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans, La.

Since the BCS was established in 1998 to determine which two teams would meet for the national championship, the Big Ten has benefited more than any other conference. In 13 years, there have now been 57 BCS bowls, with the Big Ten being represented in 23 of those games, more than any other conference.

This season proved to be even more remarkable as an 11-1 Michigan State squad – which beat Wisconsin head-to-head, but did not play Ohio State and was ranked the lowest of the three teams in the final BCS standings – was sent to the Capital One Bowl in Orlando, Fla., to play defending national champion

Alabama.

The Big Ten can take pride in having three 11-1 teams this season. It can take pride in having eight of 11 teams qualify for bowls (not to mention soon-to-be newcomer Nebraska is playing in the Holiday Bowl). But one thing remains certain – for all the success the past year has provided the conference, it needs to represent well in these bowls in order to avoid backlash from other conferences, writers, and fans across the country.

None of these games appear easy for the Big Ten this year. Wisconsin plays an undefeated TCU squad in Pasadena that might have had a legitimate beef for playing in the BCS National Championship Game after going 12-0. Ohio State plays a red-hot Arkansas team with 10 wins that is led by a quarterback who once suited up for the Maize and Blue before transferring.

Speaking of Michigan, the pressure remains on head coach Rich Rodriguez, and the Wolverines will need to have a good showing in the Gator Bowl against No. 21 Mississippi State in order for him to possibly keep his job.

The Spartans playing the Crimson Tide in Orlando is not an easy task, even if Alabama has injuries to deal with. Not to mention the reunion of sorts for Alabama head coach Nick Saban, who coached in East Lansing for five seasons and once had current Spartan head coach Mark Dantonio as an assistant.

Penn State benefited from Iowa's late-season debacle and moved up to the Outback Bowl, but even though Florida had a rough 2010 season itself going an identical 7-5, the game being in Tampa definitely gives the Gators a bit of a home-field advantage.

Speaking of the Hawkeyes, they not only fell to the Insight Bowl, but Iowa also drew as an opponent a Missouri squad that went 10-2 and has a win under its belt over Big 12 champion Oklahoma.

Finally, there's both Illinois and Northwestern, both of whom are bowling in the same season for the first time ever as hard as that might be to believe. Both the Fighting Illini and Wildcats have trips to the Lone Star State against Big 12 opponents that call Texas home. Illinois heads to Houston on Dec. 29 to play in the Texas Bowl against Baylor, who is playing in its first bowl game of any kind in 16 seasons. Meanwhile, Northwestern was invited to the inaugural TicketCity Bowl in Dallas, where it faces Texas Tech.

Again, not one of these games looks to be an easy victory for the Big Ten this season, which is why it is all the more important for the conference to build off the success it had in bowls last year.

And should both Wisconsin and Ohio State win their respective BCS bowls in January, the Big Ten will definitely be heading in the right direction entering 2011, when Nebraska does join the conference.

One last note relating to the addition of the Cornhuskers – the Big Ten released a statement over the weekend stating it has no further plans on expanding. Things may change down the road, but this was an easy call to make, and the right one at that.

With 12 teams, two divisions, and a championship game now in place beginning next year, there's no need to worry about expansion for the time being. Nebraska joining next year is only going to boost the Big Ten in a positive direction now, and the conference is about to be as strong as it has ever been.

Which goes back to this bowl season ahead. A strong overall showing by the Big Ten is going to only benefit the conference down the line, and maybe allow it to continue this ongoing streak of multiple BCS appearances every season.