

# 12/27/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 18 (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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As the year winds down, this is an appropriate time to reflect back on what turned out to be a monumental 2010 for the Big Ten conference.

It began last January when both the Ohio State Buckeyes and Iowa Hawkeyes won their respective BCS games. Ohio State defeated Pac-10 champion Oregon in the Rose Bowl, while Iowa manhandled ACC champion Georgia Tech in the Orange Bowl. Add wins by Penn State in the Capital One Bowl and Wisconsin in the Champs Sports Bowl, and the conference compiled a winning record in bowls last season after going 1-6 in 2008-09.

Meanwhile, Super Bowl XLIV was won by the New Orleans Saints, and their leader was named the game's Most Valuable Player. Drew Brees, the quarterback who guided Purdue to a Big Ten crown in 2000 and a trip to the 2001 Rose Bowl had finally cemented himself as one of the league's elite quarterbacks, joining the likes of former Michigan signal-caller Tom Brady.

From there, the Big Ten's reputation in men's basketball also began to really take off. Although only five teams qualified for the NCAA Tournament, there was one – Michigan State – that reached its second consecutive Final Four and third in six years under head coach Tom Izzo.

In fact, there was a three-way tie for first place between the Spartans, Purdue Boilermakers, and Ohio State Buckeyes, who possessed the National Player of the Year in Evan Turner (also the second overall pick in the NBA Draft by the Philadelphia 76ers), and won the tiebreaker for the top seed in the Big Ten Tournament. Ohio State would win the 2010 Big Ten Tournament, thanks in large part to Turner's buzzer-beating 3-pointer in the quarterfinals against Michigan.

In the championship game, the Buckeyes defeated an up-and-coming Minnesota program led by former Kentucky head coach Tubby Smith. The Golden Gophers pulled off an improbable run as a No. 6 seed by reaching the title game at Consecro Fieldhouse, and it proved to be enough as far as being one of the last "bubble teams" to find itself dancing last March.

Then came the summer, when perhaps the biggest news of the year in college sports, period, occurred.

Nebraska, a school that was forever associated with the Big 12 and what used to be the Big 8, was welcomed in by commissioner Jim Delany. The Big Ten had finally secured that 12th member it had longed for. Finally, divisions could be assembled in football, as well as a conference championship game.

This all came to fruition sooner than expected, but nevertheless, the Cornhuskers made a significant jump that looks to pay off for Nebraska down the road.

As a result, the entire country was buzzing. Fans all over from other various conferences began wondering what would happen next. Other transitions have been made since Nebraska, but none of them were to the same degree.

Prior to the beginning of the college football season, the Big Ten announced who would be in each division. It may not have been decided the way most fans probably would have preferred (a straight East-West split), but what resulted were two divisions built primarily on competitive balance over the past

18 years. In one division would be Illinois, Indiana, Ohio State, Penn State, Purdue, and Wisconsin. In the other would be Iowa, Michigan, Michigan State, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Northwestern.

Conference schedules for 2011 and 2012 were completely revised. In addition, "protected rivalries" were established in order to keep games between interdivisional opponents such as Ohio State-Michigan.

As the 2010 Big Ten season progressed, three different coaches reached milestone win plateaus. In October, Ohio State's Jim Tressel earned his 100th career victory as the Buckeyes' head coach, a position he has held for 10 seasons. Then on the same day, Iowa's Kirk Ferentz won his 100th game and inside a surreal Beaver Stadium, Penn State legend Joe Paterno won his 400th game as the Nittany Lions' head coach after Penn State came from behind to defeat Northwestern.

Speaking of the Wildcats, Northwestern found a way to promote itself in the Chicagoland area more than ever before by getting its home game against in-state rival Illinois to be played at Wrigley Field, home of the Chicago Cubs. It was the first football game played at the Friendly Confines in over 40 years, and while only one end zone was used as a safety precaution, it still gave the program exposure it desperately was seeking.

The 2010 football season culminated with something that will never happen again – another 3-way tie. Like the basketball one, it featured Ohio State and Michigan State. But the third team to comprise this trio of 11-1 teams was Wisconsin. Although the Badgers lost to the Spartans in East Lansing, Mich., they did beat the Buckeyes at Camp Randall Stadium. And when the final BCS Standings were released, it was Bret Bielema's Wisconsin Badgers booking their trip to Pasadena, Calif., where it will play New Year's Day against an unbeaten TCU squad.

With the conference holding its inaugural Big Ten Championship Game in 2011 at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis, Ind., there will now always be one team that can outright call itself a conference champion.

But while the Badgers and their fans are the ones that came up smelling roses, Ohio State and Michigan State both have reasons to hold their heads high. The Buckeyes earned a share of their sixth straight Big Ten crown, which is not only unprecedented, but was enough to get Ohio State a spot in the Sugar Bowl, a sixth consecutive BCS bowl appearance under Tressel and eighth in the last nine years.

As for the Spartans, this marked the first time they had won even a share of the Big Ten since 1990. It didn't result in a BCS bowl game, but considering everything Michigan State went through at the start of the season with head coach Mark Dantonio suffering a heart attack and missing two games (including that critical win over Wisconsin), this was still a storybook season in East Lansing.

Finally, Delany finally revealed both the conference's new logo going forward, as well as the names of the football divisions next season. Neither the logo nor the names "Legends" and "Leaders" received much fanfare publicly (if at all), but at least Delany said the division names would be reconsidered.

As 2011 approaches, it will be interesting to see what type of impact Nebraska's addition will have on the conference, not just in football, but in all sports. It will be interesting to see how much longer Paterno remains in charge at Penn State. It will be interesting to see just how many basketball teams make the NCAA Tournament and if one of them (Northwestern) finally breaks through for the first time ever.

If you are a fan of any of the 12 schools, this is great time to be associated with the Big Ten. Because for now at least,

the future appears bright.