

# 1/3/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 19 (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

*HawkeyeDrive.com*

There is no way to sugarcoat this: The Big Ten's reputation as a power football conference took a nosedive on New Year's Day, and the ridicule for this is deserving.

When the eight bowl games featuring conference teams were first announced, the difficulty of every game was apparent. But what was also apparent was the Big Ten's need to carry over 2010's success into 2011.

So far, Iowa and Illinois (perhaps both surprisingly) each held their ends of the bargain. The Hawkeyes upset No. 14 Missouri in the Insight Bowl on Dec. 28, while the Fighting Illini defeated Baylor in the Texas Bowl the following day. As well, No. 6 Ohio State plays in the Allstate Sugar Bowl on Tuesday in New Orleans against No. 8 Arkansas, so any criticism that could come the Buckeyes' way needs to be delayed until that game's conclusion.

But New Year's Day. Zero wins, five losses. Regardless of school affiliation, this is an awful pill to swallow if you're Big Ten commissioner Jim Delany, or anyone else associated with the conference in any form.

Warranted or not, conferences are ultimately judged on how

their schools perform in bowl games. What happened on New Year's Day is simply an embarrassment. Add in newcomer Nebraska looking dreadful in losing the Holiday Bowl to a Washington team it crushed back in September, and it is hard to blame anyone for ridiculing the Big Ten's shortcomings right now.

By going 0-5 on New Year's Day, the conference failed to have a single New Year's Day bowl winner for the first time since Jan. 1, 2002. But on that day, it was only Michigan, Ohio State, and Illinois (who won the Big Ten, but was sent to the Sugar Bowl) that lost. It should also be noted all three of those defeats came to teams from the SEC.

This year, the Big Ten did lose all three New Year's Day bowls pitted against SEC opponents. To its credit, at least Penn State put up somewhat of a fight before Florida eventually pulled away and won the Outback Bowl. Meanwhile, Michigan and No. 7 Michigan State laid giant eggs, which will be expanded on a bit later.

First though, let's get to the other two losses, both of which were relatively close. Northwestern lost 45-38 to Texas Tech in the inaugural TicketCity Bowl. Now, the Wildcats might have won this game had quarterback Dan Persa not been hurt, and they deserve a little credit for fighting their way back from a 31-9 deficit.

But with that said, until Northwestern finally ends this bowl-victory drought (now at 61 years and counting), this is a part of the program's identity it will have to continue dealing with.

As for the Rose Bowl, no one should take anything away from what No. 3 TCU managed to accomplish by beating No. 5 Wisconsin in Pasadena last weekend. However, it is certainly fair to question what the Badgers were doing in terms of offensive play-calling.

In hindsight, most would probably agree that this year, Wisconsin proved to be the best representative for the conference in this year's Rose Bowl. But like it or not, for every person applauding TCU's achievements, there is someone else ridiculing the Badgers for losing to a team from the Mountain West. As unfair as that might be to both teams, it is the truth. No one in Badgerland was feeling good after that game.

Now back to the Michigan teams, which might have both been better not showing up. The Spartans lost the Capital One Bowl to a 15th-ranked Alabama squad that proved to be far superior, and it is not so much Michigan State losing that was bothersome, but how it lost. The Crimson Tide were ahead 49-0 in the fourth quarter before the Spartans scored to avoid the shutout. Brutal.

The biggest shame in this if you are a Spartan fan is that now, everyone looks at Michigan State finishing 11-2 and remains not only skeptical about that program, but about the entire conference as well.

And Michigan. Early on, the Wolverines looked like they would give No. 21 Mississippi State all it could handle in the Gator Bowl. But by halftime, the outcome was all but determined. Worse yet for Michigan, the pressure cooker shot up even higher with both head coach Rich Rodriguez and defensive coordinator Greg Robinson, both of whom have been the butts of many, many jokes around the country.

Sure, the ACC and Big East both may have looked a lot less impressive between September and December. Right now though, all anyone is talking about (besides next week's national championship game) is the pitiful display put on by Big Ten teams this past New Year's Day.

For those already attempting to look ahead in 2011, it feels as though the conference has suddenly become much more wide

open than it might have been at this time last week. Check that, both divisions appear to be wide open, not just the conference in general.

But what will really hurt the Big Ten heading into next season is that when preseason polls are put together, those who vote are going to remember what just occurred, and like it or not, it will carry over into how each voter casts its preseason ballots.

Is it a shame? Yes. But that is the reality. That is what happens when a conference loses five bowl games within hours of one another.