

1/17/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 21 (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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On Monday, the Ohio State Buckeyes capitalized on defending national champion Duke's loss to Florida State last week and are now ranked No. 1 nationally in college basketball.

What makes Ohio State's success this season so incredible is that the bar for this team was so high after winning both a share of the Big Ten regular season crown and the Big Ten Tournament, and the Buckeyes have only gotten better.

They are currently one of only four unbeaten teams in all of college basketball – the others being Kansas, San Diego State, and Syracuse.

What makes this even more incredible is that when this week's AP poll was released, there were six Big Ten teams in the top 25.

This is a testament to the impact Thad Matta has had on the Ohio State program since taking over in 2004.

It is stressed repeatedly by those associated with the sport how recruiting has such a vital impact. The argument can be made that since Matta arrived in Columbus, no one in the Big Ten has recruited better.

In 2006, he brought in a heralded class of freshmen featuring Mike Conley, Jr., and Greg Oden, who many thought could have been a No. 1 NBA draft pick as a high school junior in Indianapolis and ended up being taken No. 1 overall in 2007 by the Portland Trail Blazers. That team went to the Final Four and ended up losing the national championship game that year to Florida, who was the defending champion.

Then fast forward to last year. Matta is coaching the best player in the country at the time in Evan Turner, a man who was a threat for a triple-double every single night he stepped on the floor for Ohio State. Turner ended up being the second overall pick by the Philadelphia 76ers in last year's NBA Draft, but not before he led the Buckeyes to Big Ten regular season and tournament titles, and a trip to the Sweet 16.

Aside from Turner, every other starter from last year's squad is back for Ohio State. Junior guard William Buford was the Big Ten's Freshman of the Year two seasons ago. Senior Jon Diebler is one of the nation's top 3-point shooters, as he currently averages 49.5 percent shooting from beyond the arc. Senior center Dallas Lauderdale provides the Buckeyes with size in the paint and is a beast off the boards. David Lighty, a fifth-year senior, brings that championship-type experience having been a part of that 2007 Final Four team at Ohio State.

Then there's Jared Sullinger, who right now might be the best player in the Big Ten, and at the very least is a guy who will play in the NBA someday. Right now, Sullinger averages 17.6 points and 9.9 rebounds per game.

Throw in freshman guard Aaron Craft as a sixth man, and it is clear why the Buckeyes are so highly-touted right now.

Maybe this team does not win a national championship, or even get to the Final Four. But if Ohio State does manage to repeat as conference champions, there is a good chance of the Buckeyes being a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament two months

from now.

This is the kind of team everyone ought to be keeping their eyes on. Not just now while the Buckeyes are ranked No. 1 in the country, but throughout the course of this regular season.