

2/7/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 24 (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

As the conference approaches its final month of the regular season before the Big Ten Men's Basketball Tournament in Indianapolis, Ind., it does not appear to look as strong as many expected at the start of the season.

Entering the Feb. 8 showdown between Indiana and No. 14 Purdue, not only are there just three Big Ten teams ranked in the latest AP Top 25, but those same three teams are the only ones with winning records in league play.

Yes, Ohio State is still the nation's only unbeaten and ranked No. 1 in the country, but that could easily change this coming weekend when the Buckeyes travel to the Kohl Center in Madison, Wis., to face the 13th-ranked Badgers.

Right now, Illinois would be the No. 4 seed in next month's Big Ten Tournament currently possessing a 5-5 conference record. Then there's a three-way tie for fifth place between Penn State, Michigan State and Minnesota, who are all a game below .500 in Big Ten play at 5-6.

Sure, the argument could be made that these teams are all beating up on each other, and that would be true to an extent.

But upon further examination, all four of those middle tier

teams have some losses that would look bad on any NCAA Tournament résumé. Of these teams, the one with the best shot to be dancing this March is the Golden Gophers. Minnesota is coming off a disappointing week that included a 60-57 loss at Indiana on Feb. 2, but the Golden Gophers are just outside the top 25 (they're actually ranked 25th in the Coaches poll) and they are done playing all three of Ohio State, Purdue, and Wisconsin.

In other words, being that No. 4 seed is still a distinct possibility for Tubby Smith's squad if it handles its business in its final seven conference games.

Illinois probably has a chance, but the Fighting Illini have already lost road games to Indiana and Northwestern, and the schedule does it no favors. Road games remain still against Minnesota, Michigan State, Ohio State and Purdue.

Penn State has been somewhat of a surprise in league play early on, with its most notable win right now being a 56-52 victory on Jan. 29 at home over Wisconsin. But a second loss over the weekend to Michigan really doesn't help its résumé, one that is still subpar at best. The Nittany Lions still have a rematch with the Badgers in Madison, as well as a home game late in the season against Ohio State, but right now, Penn State does not look like an NCAA tourney team.

Then there is Michigan State, a team that right now is like watching road kill get feasted on by a bunch of vultures. The current freefall this program is in is beyond inexplicable.

Coming into this season, the Spartans were not only the consensus pick to win the Big Ten, but they were ranked second in the country. There was good reason for this, too. Michigan State has played in each of the last two Final Fours and had plenty of experience returning.

Up until a few weeks ago, the Spartan résumé lacked luster, but did not appear to have any head-scratching losses aside

from maybe losing at Penn State on Jan. 8. But of Michigan State's five Big Ten wins, the last three have all been decided in overtime, at home no less.

After losing at home to Michigan for the first time since Tom Izzo's first season as head coach in East Lansing, the Spartans beat Indiana in overtime by one point, but proceeded to hit rock bottom on the road this past week. First, Michigan State lost by 20 points to an Iowa team that was alone in last place. Then last weekend, Wisconsin, one of those teams the Spartans beat at home in overtime, gave Michigan State a woodshed beating at the Kohl Center.

Back in October, the feeling seemed to be that six teams would for sure make the NCAA Tournament, with Northwestern being a possible seventh squad to join the fray. This could still end up being the case, but right now, it sure does not look that way.

If this was Selection Sunday, there would probably be four, maybe five teams dancing (barring a stunning turn of events at the Big Ten Tournament). Minnesota and Illinois would be the bubble teams, and with the two meeting at Williams Arena on Feb. 10, that game could go a long way in deciding things if this current situation sticks to form.

This all goes back to the phrase that "perception is reality." Right now, the national perception of the Big Ten being an overrated conference looks more and more like reality. This is all worth keeping an eye on, especially as Selection Sunday draws closer.

Because if the Big Ten gets in a lower number than originally expected and any of those teams lose earlier than anticipated, any credibility gained over the past couple of years would slowly be brushed aside.

Like it or not, that is the truth, and the truth can sometimes hurt. Just ask Izzo.