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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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After seven Big Ten teams qualified for the 2011 NCAA Tournament, only two remain as the Sweet 16 kicks off later this week.

One of those teams is fairly obvious in Ohio State. The Buckeyes, who hold the No. 1 seed in the East Regional, cruised to victories this weekend over Texas-San Antonio and George Mason. The other team, however, is slightly unexpected. That would be the Wisconsin Badgers, who are the No. 4 seed in the Southeast Regional.

This should not feel too surprising. In terms of its seeding, Wisconsin was supposed to get this far. Finishing third in the Big Ten this season, the Badgers had the type of season most Sweet 16 teams typically have.

But Wisconsin came into this tournament limping. The regular season ended with a damaging loss at Ohio State, and it was followed up by an abysmal loss to Penn State in the Big Ten Tournament, a game where the Badgers held the Nittany Lions to 36 points, but could only muster 33 themselves. Most teams that hold an opponent under 40 points win, but this was not the case that night.

As a result, many felt Wisconsin came into this tournament very vulnerable. First, the Badgers had to travel all the way out to Tucson, Ariz., after letting what would have been a short bus trip to Chicago, Ill., slip through their fingertips. As if that was not enough, Wisconsin's second round opponent was a 13 seed in Belmont that won 30 games this season. Many felt an upset could be in the making.

The Badgers found a way to get by the Bruins, then faced a No. 5 seed in Kansas State that some felt could reach the Final Four even after failing to meet most of the preseason expectations laid on it.

Despite the fact that Kansas State guard Jacob Pullen scored 38 points, Wisconsin found away to emerge victorious, 70-65, over a more athletic Wildcat club.

Love him or hate him, a tip of the cap has to be given to Wisconsin head coach Bo Ryan. The Badgers have made the NCAA Tournament every season under his watch since he came to Madison, Wis., and this marks the fourth time he has guided Wisconsin to the Sweet 16, where it will face eighth-seeded Butler after the Bulldogs shocked top-seeded Pittsburgh on March 19.

Should the Badgers prevail on March 24 down in New Orleans, Wisconsin would reach the Elite Eight for the first time since 2005, when it lost to eventual national champion North Carolina. Coming into this season, the thought of the Badgers advancing this far was unthinkable. Now, it's becoming a reality.

While this feels surprising what Wisconsin has accomplished, maybe it is not. After all, the Badgers did return senior Jon Leuer after he was first-team all-Big Ten in 2009-10, and reached that plateau again this season. Then there was the play of junior Jordan Taylor, who is arguably the top point guard in the country. Even though the offensive numbers were

not there for Taylor against Kansas State last weekend, he still found a way to be a factor and made two enormous plays at the defensive end of the floor.

This Sweet 16 contest will be a test for Wisconsin, as losing to Butler would feel no different than NCAA Tournament exits the past few seasons from teams such as Cornell, Xavier, Davidson, and UNLV. But should the Badgers knock out the defending national runner-up, 40 minutes would stand between them and the Final Four. Again, no one was thinking this back in October.

Regardless of how this story ends, one thing is clear: The Wisconsin Badgers are in good hands when it comes to men's basketball.