

2011 Big Ten Media Days: Day One observations

By Brendan Stiles

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CHICAGO, Ill. – Big Ten Media Days is a two-day event, and for reporters like myself, the first day is used specifically to hear from coaches, whereas the players become more accessible on Day Two.

But with that being said, there was a lot that came out of Thursday's events at the Hyatt Regency McCormick Place, so without further ado, let me share some of the observations I made:

1. This conference is wide open

Granted, there are some teams that obviously have a better chance than others. But with that in mind, I can't remember the start of a Big Ten season where it seemed as though a plethora of teams had a realistic shot of winning the conference. Some of it might be the uncertainty surrounding Ohio State, who has been a perennial favorite to win the Big Ten in past years. Some of it might stem from the rise of such programs as Wisconsin and Michigan State, both of whom were co-champions in 2010. Even Nebraska, despite this being its first season in the league, has a talented team fully capable of being the Big Ten's representative in Pasadena on Jan. 2, 2012.

2. Michigan/Ohio State: Different regimes, but same animosity

Both of these storied programs went through drastic changes this offseason. Michigan fired Rich Rodriguez following its loss in the Gator Bowl to Mississippi State and replaced him

with Brady Hoke, a former Michigan assistant who came over from San Diego State. Meanwhile, Jim Tressel resigned from Ohio State on Memorial Day in light of the ongoing saga in Columbus, and the Buckeyes hired from within naming Luke Fickell as interim coach.

However, hearing both coaches talk about their annual end-of-season showdown against the other made clear that the hate might be as bitter as it has ever been. Fickell responded to a question about the rivalry without referring to Michigan by name. Any name. Hoke, on the other hand, continues to refer to Ohio State simply as "Ohio." He did so again Thursday while answering a question that included mentions of Notre Dame and Michigan State by exact name. That game on Nov. 26 might be a dandy.

3. New faces all around the conference

Adding to the first two observations is how abundantly clear the new blood in the conference was represented. In addition to Fickell and Hoke, the Big Ten welcomes Bo Pelini as he enters his fourth season at the helm in Lincoln, as well as new guys in Jerry Kill and Kevin Wilson at Minnesota and Indiana, respectively. Kill comes in replacing Tim Brewster, who was fired during the middle of last season (and ironically was on hand Thursday as he will be a game analyst for Fox Sports). Wilson replaces Bill Lynch, who just couldn't win games at Indiana when it really mattered.

I didn't get a chance to hear Kill speak as his press conference took place when we were all gathered outside talking with Kirk Ferentz. But I did hear Wilson talk, and while I'm not sure when exactly the Hoosiers do turn things around, I see a very confident man taking over that program. Hoosier fans that heard Wilson speak Thursday have to feel encouraged by what he can do for Indiana over time.

4. Once again, this could be a make or break season for Ron

Zook

Now granted, I said at this time last year that Zook was one of four coaches I thought was on the hot seat (the others being Lynch, Rodriguez and Brewster). As it turned out, Zook is the lone man from that coaching quartet still around. He joked Thursday how entering his seventh season at Illinois seemed "mind-boggling," but nevertheless, he's in charge of a team coming off an impressive victory over Baylor last season in what was formerly known as the Texas Bowl.

The Fighting Illini made a bowl, and that's all fine and good. I also understand Illinois took a hit in the offseason with running back Mikel Leshoure, defensive lineman Corey Liuget and linebacker Martez Wilson all going pro early. However, the Fighting Illini have eight home games this season, one of two teams (the other being Michigan) that has this claim. Ohio State, Michigan, and Wisconsin all have to visit Memorial Stadium. Not to mention its toughest road game is against a Penn State squad it beat by 20 points in Beaver Stadium last year, and the Fighting Illini avoid Iowa, Michigan State and Nebraska this season.

Simply put, Illinois has no excuse to not win 7-8 games in 2011. Another 6-6 regular season would be a disappointment, and not becoming bowl-eligible would have to be the final nail in Zook's coffin, at least one would think.

5. Nebraska defense could be a difference-maker

I get that Nebraska received the conference schedule from murderer's row, but let's not fool ourselves. I not only believe the Cornhuskers have the best defense in the Big Ten, but I don't really think it's even that close.

On the "Players to Watch" list released by the Big Ten Thursday morning, the Legends Division featured three quarterbacks (I'll get to this in a second), and two defensive players, both of whom hail from Nebraska – defensive tackle

Jared Crick and linebacker Lavonte David.

Crick is hands down the best defensive lineman in the conference. His sophomore season, he was first-team all-Big 12, and he played alongside Ndamukong Suh. Last year, he led all Big 12 defensive linemen with 70 tackles and his 9.5 sacks were second in the conference. To put that into perspective, Ryan Kerrigan, the former Purdue defensive end that was the Big Ten's Defensive Player of the Year, had 70 tackles and 12.5 sacks in 2010.

Then there's linebacker Lavonte David, who led the Big 12 in tackles last season. In fact, his 152 tackles were 35 more than that of last year's leading tackler in the Big Ten, former Michigan linebacker Jonas Mouton. Throw in cornerback Alfonzo Dennard, and you're talking about a defense that has serious potential. Even in an offensive-heavy conference like the Big 12 was when Nebraska was in it, the Cornhuskers' defense stood out. At last year's Insight Bowl, Missouri's offensive players compared Iowa's defense to that of Nebraska's. Both teams beat Missouri.

6. Quarterbacks still aplenty

Is the crop of signal-callers as potent as it was in 2010 for the Big Ten? Probably not. But four guys in particular are going to be of heavy topic in 2011.

First, let's start with the returning guys. Denard Robinson (Michigan), Kirk Cousins (Michigan State), and Dan Persa (Northwestern) are all back this year. Not only that, but they're all in the same division. Robinson is the reigning Offensive Player of the Year in the conference, but will be running a different style of offense with Hoke in charge. Cousins is back after leading the Spartans to a co-Big Ten championship. Persa returns from a horrific Achilles' injury suffered against Iowa last season, but he's going to have Jeremy Ebert and Drake Dunsmore back to throw the ball to.

Then there's Russell Wilson, who transferred from North Carolina State this summer to Wisconsin. Bret Bielema said Wilson has a chance to potentially start right away for the Badgers, and honestly, I don't see why he wouldn't barring any sort of injury in the next month. So even though guys like Ricky Stanzi, Terrelle Pryor, Ben Chappell and Adam Weber are gone, this conference remains stacked at the QB position.

7. What can be taken away about Iowa?

Well to be honest, not a whole lot that wasn't already known.

[The preseason 2-deep](#) came out Thursday morning, and there weren't a ton of surprises. James Vandenberg is the obvious choice at quarterback. Marcus Coker is the obvious choice at running back. Micah Hyde is still listed as a free safety after working at the position throughout the spring.

There are still some questions that do need to be addressed, but it's not as simple as receiving a verbal explanation from Ferentz or any of the players. Until the Hawkeyes take the field against Tennessee Tech on Sept. 3, those questions might not truly be answered.

8. What would have been my preseason ballot

The Big Ten decided to no longer let the media assemble a list of top 3 teams and preseason honors for offensive and defensive players of the year.

Any time I do take part in such balloting, I feel obligated as a reporter to disclose my selections unless told beforehand to remain anonymous for whatever reason. So with that in mind, I end this column with my preseason favorites for both divisions and both player of the year accolades. All other preseason predictions I give will be revealed over the course of the next month.

- LEADERS DIVISION – Wisconsin
- OFFENSIVE PLAYER – Denard Robinson, QB, Michigan
- DEFENSIVE PLAYER – Jared Crick, DT, Nebraska