

Top Big Ten non-conference games to watch in 2011 (premium)

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With the 2011 college football season kicking off next month, I've decided to put together a 2-part series ranking what I believe to be the biggest games in the Big Ten this season. This first part focuses exclusively on non-conference games played in September (Purdue plays Notre Dame on Oct. 1 and Northwestern plays Rice on Nov. 12).

The second part, which will be published Wednesday, will focus on conference games.

Week 1 (9/1/2011-9/3/2011): Northwestern at Boston College

The first week features some intrigue. Wisconsin opens its season on Sept. 1 in a Thursday night game against UNLV. Michigan State opens Sept. 2 in a Friday night game against Youngstown State. The other 10 Big Ten teams play that Saturday.

Now the reasons Northwestern at Boston College has my attention are as follows: For starters, this is a game between two programs pretty similar in terms of where they're being ranked by prognosticators right now. Boston College is an above-average ACC team, Northwestern an above-average Big Ten program.

From the Wildcats' perspective, they are one of two Big Ten teams (the other being Minnesota) opening their season on the road. I don't see the Golden Gophers winning at USC, but I do think Northwestern has a realistic shot of winning this game

at Boston College. This is also going to be the first game Dan Persa plays at quarterback since rupturing his Achilles' Tendon in the Wildcats' 21-17 win over Iowa last season. How he looks here could potentially say a lot about how far he can take Northwestern in 2011, and keep in mind the Wildcats are returning a pretty experience offense in general.

Leaving Chestnut Hill, Mass., with a win could eventually lead to bigger things for Northwestern as the season progresses. A loss, and the uncertainty remains, at least until the start of Big Ten play.

Week 2 (9/10/2011): Notre Dame at Michigan

I realize Penn State plays host to Alabama the same day, but here's where the two games differ in my opinion: Even though the Nittany Lions are at home, practically no one will be expecting them to beat a Crimson Tide squad that will be picked by many (myself included) to play in the BCS National Championship Game. On the other hand, Michigan's game against Notre Dame could prove to be make-or-break for both programs involved.

Like it or not, whoever wins this game in the Big House will receive tons of national media attention, probably for the rest of the season. If Notre Dame prevails here and can get through September with at least a 3-1 record, the Fighting Irish will be in the discussion for a BCS bowl the rest of the way with the schedule it has. As for Michigan, a win here in the first night game ever played in "The Big House" could really be a catalyst for Brady Hoke in his first season as coach. The Wolverines play eight home games this season, including this contest.

A win here, and things could set up quite nicely this year for a Michigan team that dodges both Wisconsin and Penn State in regular-season play. Not to mention there will be excitement in Ann Arbor again surrounding this program.

Week 3 (9/17/2011): Ohio State at Miami

Honestly, there are five match-ups on Sept. 17 that intrigue me. The list features games such as Iowa playing host to Pittsburgh, Nebraska playing Washington for the third time in a calendar year, Michigan State playing at Notre Dame, and Illinois playing host to Arizona State.

But even though neither Ohio State nor Miami are anything close to what both resembled when they met in the 2003 Fiesta Bowl, this Buckeyes/Hurricanes game is very significant.

From Miami's perspective, this is the Hurricanes' home opener in 2011. They play one ACC game at Maryland on Labor Day then have 11 days in-between that game and this one. Miami also has a first-year coach in Al Golden, so things are going to be pretty different from when these two teams met at the Horseshoe last year.

As for Ohio State, this is the Buckeyes' first road game and at this point in the season, it will also be the biggest challenge interim head coach Luke Fickell has faced in terms of 2011 opponents. A win at Miami could go a long way for Ohio State as it dives into Big Ten play in October. A loss to the Hurricanes though, and the questions of whether Fickell is the guy for the job or whether there's too much for Ohio State to overcome this year will resurface.

Week 4 (9/24/2011): San Diego State at Michigan

I'll be honest. There really aren't any good match-ups this week. It's not as awful as the group of games played on Sept. 25, 2010, but it's still bad.

Nebraska plays at Wyoming, but that's not a game anyone expects the Cornhuskers to lose. Ohio State plays Colorado at home in the only Big Ten game involving two BCS programs, but the odds of the Buffaloes leaving The Horseshoe with a win don't appear strong. Another dark horse I considered was

Minnesota playing host to a North Dakota State squad that defeated the Golden Gophers in 2007.

But the game with the most intrigue that day, at least in my eyes, is Michigan playing host to San Diego State. Why? Because Brady Hoke left San Diego State last winter to become Michigan's head coach and right away, he gets to face his former program he helped turn around in a span of two years.

Unlike Wyoming or Colorado, the Aztecs actually won a bowl game last season, defeating Navy in the Poinsettia Bowl. Granted, the game was played in their home stadium, but it's still a significant indicator of what Hoke was able to accomplish there. This game has the best storyline. That's why it gets the consideration here.