

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

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In this second part of a two-part series, I now shift attention to what I see being the most significant Big Ten conference games this 2011 season. The [first part](#) of this series examined the non-conference slate all but two teams will be completing in the month.

Week 5 (10/1/2011): Nebraska at Wisconsin

The other game I thought about here was Michigan State at Ohio State because if Sparty were to prevail, it would be gaining a ton of confidence going through the remainder of its season. But this one here is too obvious.

For one thing, it's Nebraska's first official Big Ten game. Secondly, this could be a preview of this year's Big Ten Championship Game. In my opinion, these are the two best teams in the conference, and we're going to get an idea right away whether that thought comes to fruition in December.

Week 6 (10/8/2011): Iowa at Penn State

Look, I get that Ohio State/Nebraska has far more luster and is the marquee game this weekend. But this Iowa/Penn State game is worth mentioning because of both teams' schedules.

Whoever wins this game has a chance to really do some damage in October and set themselves up for a make-or-break run in November. The Hawkeyes play home games against Northwestern and Indiana and at Minnesota to conclude the month. This is also the Hawkeyes' Big Ten opener as they will be coming off a bye week.

As for Penn State, it concludes October with games against Purdue and Illinois at home, and at Northwestern. Win this game here against an Iowa that has had their number each of the past three seasons, and the Nittany Lions could potentially enter the most daunting part of their schedule sitting at 5-0 in the Big Ten and 8-1 overall.

Week 7 (10/15/2011): Ohio State at Illinois

This is easily the biggest challenge the Fighting Illini will have had to date, and this is one of three marquee home games Illinois has in 2011. Meanwhile, the Buckeyes will have just played both Michigan State and Nebraska when they head to Memorial Stadium, and this game could really test Ohio State's psyche if it's 1-1 or even 0-2 in the Big Ten when this game appears on the schedule.

If Illinois is going to do any sort of serious damage in 2011, this is a game it needs to win, especially since so many other intangibles are in the Fighting Illini's favor in 2011.

Week 8 (10/22/2011): Wisconsin at Michigan State

Michigan State is going to be coming off what it always an emotional affair playing Michigan the week before at home. This is a battle of last year's co-champions, and while the Spartans won last year's meeting, it was Wisconsin that got the Rose Bowl invite.

Speaking of the Badgers, if they get by Nebraska at home, there's a good chance Bucky enters this one unbeaten. If that ends up being the case, Wisconsin enters Spartan Stadium a top 5 team, and this is the first of consecutive road night games.

Week 9 (10/29/2011): Wisconsin at Ohio State

Regardless of whether the Buckeyes are ruled ineligible from participating in a bowl or the Big Ten title game should they win the Leaders division, this is one of the biggest games of

the entire season. Considering how Wisconsin shredded apart Ohio State last season, this is the one game (besides Michigan) I'm willing to bet Buckeye fans around the country are thinking about the most.

With both teams being in the Leaders division, this could potentially evolve into one of the biggest, if not the biggest, rivalries the Big Ten has to offer with the new divisional format. Should Wisconsin still be undefeated after playing both Nebraska and Michigan State, this game will absolutely decide the division, and there's a good chance that a road win over the Buckeyes could lead to bigger things for the Badgers down the road.

Week 10 (11/5/2011): Michigan at Iowa

By this point in the season, we should have a pretty good idea about both the Wolverines and Hawkeyes. For Iowa, this starts the most critical portion of its conference schedule, as divisional games against Michigan State and at Nebraska follow. Michigan will remain in the middle of a stretch where it plays four of five away from the Big House, and this might be the most challenging of those road contests for them to win, as the Hawkeyes have won each of the last two seasons.

If nothing else, this game is probably one where the loser is no longer in the picture as far as contending for the Legends division is concerned.

Week 11 (11/12/2011): Nebraska at Penn State

This will be the first Big Ten meeting between these two historic programs, but there's more to it than this.

As far as Nebraska's concerned, this is the first of two mammoth road games for the Cornhuskers. For Penn State, this not only begins an extremely difficult three-game stretch to end the regular season, but it also happens to be the Nittany Lions' home finale in 2011.

Which of course leads to the question that continues to get asked at this time every year: Will this be Joe Paterno's last game on the sidelines at Beaver Stadium. It might be, it might not be. That hasn't been determined yet. But regardless of what lies ahead for Paterno in the future, there's enough emotion that will be on display this afternoon that winning this game is going to be a taller task for Nebraska in actuality than it might be on paper.

Week 12 (11/19/2011): Nebraska at Michigan

If Penn State beats Nebraska the week before, the Nittany Lions' Nov. 19 contest at Ohio State might have more at stake. But as far as Nebraska's concerned, this is a game the Cornhuskers need to win. The challenge comes with playing at The Big House right after playing a big-time game at Penn State.

From the Wolverines' end of things, Michigan gets to return home for two straight marquee showdowns after playing four of five away from Ann Arbor. This is also going to be an intriguing battle in terms of quarterbacks, as both Nebraska's Taylor Martinez and Michigan's Denard Robinson will both have a chance to showcase their duel-threat talents.

Week 13 (11/25/2011-11/26/2011): Ohio State at Michigan

There might be more at stake in some of the other regular season finales like Iowa/Nebraska, Penn State/Wisconsin and Michigan State/Northwestern, all of which are divisional match-ups.

But let's be honest. Ohio State/Michigan is still the Big Ten's biggest rivalry, and probably college football's biggest rivalry. It's still "The Game." And now that both teams enter this season with new head coaches (Ohio State with Luke Fickell and Michigan with Brady Hoke), this one is hard to predict as far as how it plays out.

If the Buckeyes do get hit with a postseason ban this season, then this game becomes their bowl game. This becomes their championship. From the Michigan side of things, Hoke has already gone at great lengths with this game, refusing to acknowledge his counterpart as "Ohio State." Instead, he simply calls it "Ohio." The emotions will be extremely high, and the animosity could really carry over on the gridiron when these two meet on Nov. 26.