

8/29/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 31 (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.

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An offseason of transition is finally over. After months of transition between Nebraska officially becoming a conference member, four other schools implementing new head football coaches, and divisions being established, the 2011 Big Ten football season kicks off this week.

Normally, this is a time for rejoice. Fans can finally coordinate tailgates for the upcoming Saturday. Media no longer have to divulge in preseason hoopla. Coaches and players can finally focus on a game plan for an actual opponent. All of this is great.

But given the drama that took place in college football this offseason, which includes scandal that has significantly impacted Ohio State, the future of the sport is an ongoing topic of conversation, and one worth addressing now.

Earlier this month, the Big Ten announced it had no intentions of expanding beyond 12 members, "barring a significant shift in the current intercollegiate athletic landscape." Should Texas A&M indeed bolt the Big 12 for the SEC, there's no way the SEC is staying at an odd number. There's your "significant shift" right there.

Now is the Big Ten comfortable standing pat with 12 teams now that Nebraska is a member? Probably. But over the course of the past 15 months, one thing that needs to be recognized regarding Big Ten commissioner Jim Delany is that he's not one to make a decision purely on impulse or reaction. If the Big Ten ever does expand, discussions about doing so are already happening. He's not waiting for any of the other conferences to make their move.

With that in mind, here's something else that needs to be kept in mind when discussing this. The Big Ten is going to be very meticulous with its selection process if indeed "super-conferences" are the future of this sport. There's a reason why Nebraska was the only addition – the name is marquee on top of what it provided the Big Ten in the summer of 2010 when the announcement was made.

If a school like Missouri or Pittsburgh was seriously being considered, those moves would have probably taken place already. Delany is thinking big long-term. Right now, the only two targets that would even make sense for the Big Ten would be Texas and Notre Dame, and between both the newly-formed Longhorn Television Network and Notre Dame's current NBC contract, the odds of either joining a conference where all the revenue is split among the 12 current members appear slim.

Here's the bottom line. Unless Delany were to bring in one or both of those schools, there's no reason for the Big Ten to expand further. Does it sound greedy? Perhaps. But again, Delany is a powerful man and the Big Ten is a powerful conference. If "super-conferences" are the future of college football, why shouldn't Delany and the Big Ten use that power to their advantage?

This is probably the only time this topic is worth discussing right now. But when the next offseason starts up and this issue resurfaces (and it will), keep all of this in mind for the future.