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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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Back in January, Michigan made a wise decision in hiring Brady Hoke to replace Rich Rodriguez as its head coach. Last weekend, the Wolverines pulled off a stunning win over Notre Dame in what was the first night game ever played in "The Big House," and on a national stage, Hoke solidified himself as the right man for the job.

Now granted, Rodriguez did go 2-1 against Notre Dame during his three tumultuous seasons in Ann Arbor. In fact, his record against the Fighting Irish might be one of the few bright spots from his tenure. But from the Wolverines' vantage point, this was different.

Junior quarterback Denard Robinson had a forgetful first half, then proceeded to play like the Denard Robinson everyone became accustomed to watching when he first filled in as the Wolverines' signal-caller. He only completed 11-of-24 passes, but threw for 338 yards and accounted for all five Michigan scores (four passing touchdowns, and one rushing on a designed play for the running back before the ball squirted out and landed right in front of Robinson, who proceeded to walk in and trim a 17-point deficit to just 10 points early in the fourth quarter).

This was different because of the magnitude. Sure, it was another Michigan/Notre Dame game, but with this one being played under the lights, it had a special zing to it.

Michigan still has its issues defensively, and Hoke would even acknowledge that. But the Wolverines also created Notre Dame turnovers that allowed them to stay in the game and make it possible for Robinson and company to do what they did offensively.

This was one of those games that goes down in history, one that the students at Michigan will someday tell their children and grandchildren about. The Wolverines had the game won, then lost, then won again, all in a manner of 72 seconds.

Not only that, but the play that won the game for Michigan. Hoke could have instructed Robinson to kneel down in the middle of the field to make a game-tying field goal attempt easier on his kicker. Instead, he went for the win and trusted Robinson to make the right throw, which he did to receiver Roy Roundtree. That's the sort of trust between a coach and his players that could take a team a long way. Just ask Mark Dantonio over at Michigan State.

Yes, last year's Spartans were and probably will be by this season's end, better than this year's Wolverines. But it was the same kind of guts Dantonio had in his team last year against Notre Dame that Hoke had in his squad last weekend against the Fighting Irish. It sends a loud message to the rest of college football.

Who knows? Maybe Michigan just absolutely struggles the rest of this season and ends up 6-6 and barely qualifying for a bowl. The last two seasons under Rodriguez did spiral out of control, so there's a history. But again, that was a different regime from what's in Ann Arbor now.

It's not only optimism that appears to be back at Michigan now, but also confidence, which is something the Wolverines

have lacked since the end of the Lloyd Carr era. That looks to be back now, and Hoke is a big reason why.

That's what validates his hiring, and what leads many to think that before anyone knows it, Michigan could very easily be among the Big Ten's elite once again.