

9/19/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 34 (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.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

The biggest on-the-field takeaway from the Big Ten this past weekend was the performance of an Illinois team that made the rest of the conference take notice with its 17-14 victory over Arizona State, who came into last weekend's contest ranked 22nd in the AP poll.

As a result, the Fighting Illini climbed into the Top 25 for the first time in three years and enters their Sept. 24 contest against Western Michigan ranked 24th nationally. To put this in perspective, Illinois moved up into the top 25. Michigan State and Ohio State, two teams that were co-conference champions a year ago prior to the latter vacating all its 2010 victories, both lost and fell completely out of the top 25 when the latest poll was released on Sept. 18.

Make no mistake that this victory over Arizona State was huge for head coach Ron Zook and Illinois. The big reason here being has to do with a combination of two things – the talent Zook has brought to Champaign via recruiting, and the Fighting Illini's schedule in 2011, which is very favorable.

Following this week's game against Western Michigan, Illinois' home contests consist of the following teams coming into Memorial Stadium – Northwestern, Ohio State, Michigan, and

Wisconsin. In total, the Fighting Illini will have played two-thirds of their games this season at home. The four road games consist of Indiana, Purdue, Penn State and Minnesota. Only Penn State went to a bowl game last season, and Illinois beat the Nittany Lions in State College last season by 20 points.

In other words, most of the remaining games appear winnable for this team led by a junior quarterback in Nathan Scheelhaase that has really come into his own since taking over the reigns of the Fighting Illini offense a year ago as a sophomore.

But it isn't just Scheelhaase that makes Illinois impressive. It has a running game led by senior running back Jason Ford that is strong. It features a weapon at wide receiver in A.J. Jenkins. The defense has put together its best three-game stretch to open a season since the days of Simeon Rice and Kevin Hardy wreaking havoc back in the mid-1990s.

When all those ingredients come together, a strong football team emerges. One quarter of the way through the season, this is what Illinois has become.

This is a legit contender in this conference. That much was determined last weekend after beating the Sun Devils. The two teams it will be vying with for the Leaders Division crown both have to visit Champaign later in the season. The path is set up as good as it possibly could be for this Fighting Illini squad.

Which is why at this point in time, there's no excuse for this team to only emerge with 6-7 victories. A .500 season in league play is going to result in eight wins for this team. An 8-4 record is going to result in a solid bowl game. This should be Illinois' goal at the very least.

If last weekend proved anything, there's no reason to think people won't continue to talk about this team as the season rolls along.