

9/26/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 35 (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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A week that has been highly anticipated since the moment Nebraska agreed to join the Big Ten has finally arrived. On Oct. 1, 10 of the conference's 12 teams will open league play, and it will be as different a weekend as it has ever been.

Legends and Leaders Divisions are now officially at stake. The conversations of how teams stack up in each of the two divisions are done. Now the games are vitally important.

Two of the five games on Oct. 1 feature two teams facing divisional foes when Minnesota visits No. 19 Michigan and Penn State travels to Indiana. But it's those other three games that are going to have all the drama. No. 24 Illinois plays host to Northwestern. Michigan State travels to Columbus to face Ohio State. Then there's the biggest game of them all this weekend – No. 8 Nebraska at No. 7 Wisconsin.

This seriously could not have worked out any better for the Big Ten. The plan all along was for Nebraska's first Big Ten game to be marquee, and right now, Wisconsin fits the bill. Both are top 10 teams. Both are undefeated. Wisconsin athletics director Barry Alvarez has ties to both schools. Many, including this site, have projected these two teams to meet again on Dec. 3 in the inaugural Big Ten Championship

Game at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis, Ind.

The dynamic of divisions and divisional rivalries will be somewhat different. For the Iowa fan whose team has a bye this week, rooting for teams like Wisconsin, Ohio State and Illinois might seem awkward. But if all three of those teams do win, the Hawkeyes suddenly have a leg up on teams in the Legends Division such as Nebraska, Michigan State and Northwestern without having played. That becomes significant.

For a team like Michigan, who is playing a divisional rival in Minnesota, this week is important. Because not only is a win this weekend put you atop the Legends Division, but it gives you a leg up on Minnesota as well in the event of a tiebreaker being needed at any point.

With all the talk of conference realignment somewhat subsiding for now, the focus of this week, and really the rest of this season, ought to be on some of these Big Ten match-ups, because the division format puts more on the line for all 12 teams.

This is a critical week for the conference. The stage is going to be the Big Ten's this week with "College GameDay" being in Madison and with this being the layout of the land now. What happens on Oct. 1 could go a long way in not only determining what unfolds the rest of the season and in the first championship game, but beyond as well.

The intrigue will be there. Now it's a matter of seeing how everything takes place on the gridiron. Which is really what everyone wants to see in the end.