

10/17/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 38 (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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It is about the halfway point in the 2011 college football season, and with three weeks of conference play in the books, there are a few observations worth noting about the Big Ten.

The good news for the conference is that six teams all found themselves ranked in the top 25 of the initial BCS rankings released Oct. 16. Right now, Wisconsin sits as the lone unbeaten in the conference and the lone member that has any realistic shot at playing for a national championship. However, the Badgers are going to need outside help in addition to winning out in order for a trip to New Orleans to become a reality.

Now for the not-so-good news. The Big Ten's streak of six years with at least two teams playing in BCS games appears to be in serious jeopardy. In fact, one of the only realistic possibilities remaining where two teams can still make it seems unjust a la 2007 when Kansas was picked over Missouri by the Orange Bowl despite Missouri winning head-to-head before losing the Big 12 title game to Oklahoma that year.

By the end of this week, there's a good chance of a four-way tie for first place in the Legends Division between Iowa, Michigan, Michigan State and Nebraska. From a competitive

balance perspective, this is the intrigue commissioner Jim Delany was hoping to get when the Big Ten put its two divisions together in this manner.

But with that being said, it will be a major challenge for a Legends team to secure an at-large BCS bid unless one of those four teams separates itself from the rest. Michigan State has the best shot at doing this at the moment with games against Wisconsin this week and at Nebraska next week.

Whether the Big Ten has one or two BCS teams seriously impacts the bowl pecking order. Four teams – Illinois, Michigan, Penn State and Wisconsin – have all reached the six wins necessary to become bowl-eligible. Michigan State and Nebraska can join this list with wins this coming weekend. Iowa and Ohio State both have four wins thus far.

Meanwhile, Indiana is one more defeat away from an official losing season, while Minnesota is two losses away from that mark. Both teams play Iowa this month. The Golden Gophers play host to Nebraska this week.

Purdue and Northwestern still have slim hopes of reaching six wins, but it will be a challenge for both the rest of the way. Assuming neither ends up bowl-eligible, the Big Ten is probably looking at eight teams playing in bowl games with eight bowl tie-ins. If there's only one BCS team, then all eight would be filled. If there are two BCS teams by season's end, then the Little Caesars Bowl in Detroit will need to find an at-large team to play whoever it selects from the MAC.

Not having two BCS teams might not be bad in the long run though. Yes, not having that notoriety like it has each of the past six years will be different, but it might also make for more competitive games than there were this past Jan. 1.

The one thing that seems reasonable to conclude though is that assuming Wisconsin wins the Big Ten Championship Game like many presume it will, whoever it beats that night in

Indianapolis might potentially get shafted because it earned an extra loss playing in the title game. It has happened before in other major conferences, so the possibility of it taking place in the Big Ten is real.

Either way, this continues to provide more drama, and this is fodder that will continue to be discussed over the weeks ahead here as everything sorts itself out.