

10/31/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 40 (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

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With basketball season officially starting next week, now is a good time to momentarily step away from football discussion to discuss the Big Ten's state in men's hoops entering the 2011-12 campaign.

The premise that the Big Ten will be a weak conference is a fallacy. Now is it the best basketball conference in the country like Nebraska head coach Doc Sadler said Oct. 27 at Big Ten Media Day? No. Is it as loaded a conference as it was last season? Of course not. But the drop-off from last season to this season isn't as deep as one might be led to believe.

Seven teams – Ohio State, Purdue, Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Michigan State and Penn State – reached the NCAA tournament last March. Of those seven teams, the only one that likely isn't making a trip back is the Nittany Lions, who not only lost Talor Battle, but also have a new coaching regime in place after Ed DeChellis left for Navy. As good a coach as Patrick Chambers might be, it shouldn't surprise anyone if Penn State's at the bottom of the Big Ten this season.

As for the other six, the only team that probably isn't an NCAA tournament lock is Illinois. That's not to say the Fighting Illini will be bad, but they managed to sneak into

the field of 68 after a somewhat shaky season. The other five, barring some significant season-defining issues, ought to be considered locks.

In fact, Ohio State has the making of a team that's more than capable of reaching the Final Four. Yes, this has been said the last two NCAA tournaments, and both instances had the Buckeyes getting knocked out in the Sweet 16. Ohio State loses three starters, but return the likes of Jared Sullinger, William Buford, Aaron Craft, and added two McDonald's all-Americans.

While the Buckeyes look like a clear favorite, it's not as though they're going to just blow by everyone else, either. Wisconsin brings back Jordan Taylor, who averaged 18 points per game last season. Michigan lost Darius Morris early to the NBA Draft, but returns a key player in sophomore Tim Hardaway, Jr., and is coming off a season where it nearly knocked out Duke, who was a No. 1 seed.

Michigan State features a player in Draymond Green, whose leadership has been compared to that of Magic Johnson's and Mateen Cleaves' by Tom Izzo. Purdue lost a pair of NBA draft picks, including Big Ten Player of the Year JaJuan Johnson. But Robbie Hummel is back fully healthy, and the Boilermakers would've been even better last season had he not been hurt.

Then looking at the other remaining teams, Minnesota brings back Trevor Mbakwe, who led the Big Ten in rebounding last season. Northwestern came awfully close to finally reaching its first NCAA tournament, and made a deep run in last season's NIT. Nebraska enters its first season in the Big Ten off a year where it won 19 games. Indiana is no longer a young team, but does have perhaps the conference's top freshman this year in big man Cody Zeller. Fran McCaffery has Iowa heading back in the right direction again and the Hawkeyes return a guard in Bryce Cartwright, who led the conference in assists during Big Ten play last year.

Will the Big Ten have seven teams participating in March Madness again like it did in 2010-11? That remains to be seen, and there's a chance it could be only 5-6 teams that make it. But that doesn't mean any of those teams that don't won't be in the discussion or have a crack at some other postseason tourney like the NIT or CBI (College Basketball Invitational).

It's not the best conference in the country nor will it be exactly on par with where it was at this time a year ago. But that doesn't mean the Big Ten won't be strong and won't have the same type of drama it had last season in the final weeks of Big Ten play and during the conference tournament. This ought to be another season that fans end up enjoying, to be honest.