

11/21/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 43 (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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At this time two months ago, Illinois was a top 25 team coming off a giant victory at home over Arizona State and looking like a team that could be a serious threat in the Big Ten.

Yet after starting the 2011 season 6-0, the Fighting Illini enter their contest at Minnesota on Nov. 26 with the possibility looming of them ending the season 6-6, which is what Illinois was last season prior to its win in the Texas Bowl over Baylor.

Between this current five-game losing skid and what transpired during his weekly press conference in Champaign last week, it has become clear that Illinois head coach Ron Zook has worn out his welcome. Keep in mind, this is the same head coach that last July said it was mind-blowing that he was entering his seventh season as the Fighting Illini coach.

Given how Illinois ended last season and the favorable schedule it had entering this season, 8-4 should have been the minimum for this Illinois squad. With eight home games on the schedule (including all but one of your biggest conference showdowns), this season was designed for Zook and the Fighting Illini to succeed, and for awhile there, it looked like they would do just that.

But then came Oct. 15, when Illinois played at home against a reeling Ohio State squad. The Buckeyes came into Memorial Stadium and beat the Fighting Illini despite 51 of their 55 offensive plays from scrimmage coming on the ground. Then things began to snowfall. Illinois went to Ross-Ade Stadium the following week and lost to Purdue. Then it visited Beaver Stadium and lost a game in extremely snowy conditions to a Penn State team it demolished a year ago.

After a bye week to start the month of November, the Fighting Illini lost their last two home games of the season to Michigan and most recently to Wisconsin.

Now Illinois faces a 2-9 Minnesota squad on the road, which on one hand could be a good thing because it's being played in Minneapolis as opposed to Champaign. But while the Golden Gophers are 2-9, they did beat the Fighting Illini at Memorial Stadium last season. They also beat an Iowa team in their regular season finale at home last year in a game where the Hawkeyes were uninspired, much like Illinois could be this weekend after having lost five straight games.

If the Fighting Illini were to lose to Minnesota, what bowl game is going to want them? Who would want a team that ended the season with six straight losses?

And let's not forget, Illinois has a new athletics director now in Mike Thomas, who was previously at Cincinnati before taking over for the retired Ron Guenther. He might not hesitate pulling the trigger on dismissing Zook after everything that has taken place over the past month. At the end of the day, results matter.

Zook is currently the second-longest tenured coach in the Big Ten behind Iowa's Kirk Ferentz. But at least Ferentz consistently gets Iowa to bowl games on a near-annual basis. If Illinois does still go bowling this season, it will be just the third time it will do so under Zook.

Finally, let's get back to this press conference last week when Zook stormed out after being asked about his job security. The way he handled that made a clear indication that it isn't a matter of if he gets fired at this point, but when.

If and when Zook is no longer coaching Illinois, Thomas is going to need to make a splash because not every season is going to be set up the way 2011 was for the Fighting Illini.