

12/5/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 45 (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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For the first time in its history, the Big Ten has itself 10 teams that will play in bowl games this winter. It isn't the first time the conference has had 10 teams bowl-eligible, but not all 10 teams that qualified in 2007 were privileged with a 13th football game that season.

This can be viewed in many ways and be attributed to many causes. It could be viewed as a sign that there are too many bowl games out there (35 of them to be precise). It could also be interpreted as a testament to the competitiveness those 10 teams had when playing each other.

There are basically five things that need to be noted: Michigan getting a BCS at-large, Michigan State falling to the Outback Bowl after losing the Big Ten Championship to Wisconsin, Ohio State facing Florida, the fall of Penn State in the bowl order, and Illinois getting an at-large.

Michigan, who went 10-2 this season, needed to finish in the top 14 of the final BCS Standings released Dec. 4 and ended up 13th with an invitation to the Sugar Bowl to play Virginia Tech, who also received an at-large bid. This again speaks volumes of what Brady Hoke has managed to do over the course of one year since becoming the Wolverines' head coach.

As a result of Michigan getting a BCS spot, the team who appeared to get shafted was Michigan State. Despite winning the Legends Division outright and just falling short in what was an epic Big Ten title game, the Spartans were leaped by Nebraska in the bowl order and find themselves in the Outback Bowl facing Georgia, who also lost its conference championship game over the weekend. It's a shame because Michigan State was clearly one of the league's best teams, but this is also something that's bound to happen more and more now like it has with other conferences that have title games.

Ohio State finds itself facing Florida in the Gator Bowl, and while the Urban Meyer storyline will be rampant for the next month, this match-up pales in comparison to the last time these teams met. The Gators, who were coached by Meyer, trounced the Buckeyes 41-14 in the 2007 BCS National Championship Game despite Ohio State being a heavy favorite. Five years later and these teams meet with identical 6-6 records and with new coaches (Ohio State interim Luke Fickell will step aside for Meyer following the bowl).

The Buckeyes were one of three teams to leapfrog over Penn State despite the Nittany Lions winning a share of the Leaders Division and finishing with a 9-3 overall record. Their fall to the TicketCity Bowl, which is seventh in the Big Ten bowl order, was a direct result of the fallout and negative publicity that has surrounded the Penn State program since a Grand Jury Report revealed multiple counts of sexual abuse towards children made by a former assistant coach. Is it unfair for the current players that didn't do anything wrong? Probably. But this was speculated to happen for weeks, so it isn't a surprise that it did.

Finally, there's Illinois. The Fighting Illini started the season 6-0, but lost their last six games to finish .500 and Illinois, as a result, dismissed head coach Ron Zook last week. While they didn't land a spot in any Big Ten bowl, the Fighting Illini will be playing in the Kraft Fight Hunger Bowl

against a UCLA squad dealing with similar turmoil as well.

With 10 bowl teams, the Big Ten better be ready for the scrutiny that could come its way if the struggles that showed up in last year's bowl lineup rear their ugly heads again this winter.