

12/12/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 46 (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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After a downward spiral that lasted three-plus seasons, Tom Crean just might have finally resurrected Indiana basketball from the dregs on the Big Ten.

The Hoosiers pulled off their biggest win of the Crean era on Dec. 10, when guard Christian Watford's game-winning 3-pointer as time expired propelled Indiana to a 73-72 win over top-ranked Kentucky at Assembly Hall. As a result, the Hoosiers now sit at 9-0 and entered the top 25 for the first time since Crean took over in 2008, sitting at 18th in this week's AP poll.

Much like in football when Michigan is good, the Big Ten is better in basketball when Indiana is good. The state lives and breathes the game of basketball. Even when the Hoosiers were reeling over the past three years, Assembly Hall was still one of the most intimidating college basketball atmospheres in the country. The team was bad, but the students and fans continued to support the program.

Let's remember, Crean initially walked into a sticky situation when he left Marquette in 2008 to take over for the disgraced Kelvin Sampson. He had to literally build the program back from scratch, and to the credit of Indiana fans, they knew

being patient with Crean was necessary in order for the Hoosiers to ever return to being a legit Big Ten contender year in and year out.

Now entering Crean's fourth season in Bloomington, he finally has his guys and his team in place. The biggest prize – literally – is freshman center Cody Zeller, who will probably be the league's Freshman of the Year this season. The fact that Indiana managed to land a highly-touted in-state recruit like Zeller even in the midst of an uneventful period of time speaks volumes to the efforts Crean puts into recruiting.

It will only get better for Indiana. Next year, the Hoosiers have what many consider to be a top-5 recruiting class coming in, on top of the pieces already in place.

As far as this year's team is concerned, it's more than Zeller. Players like Watford and guard Jordan Hulls, who might be as lethal a 3-point shooter as there is in the Big Ten, are now upperclassmen. They know the system Crean put in place. They know what he wants to do night in and night out and they have the leadership that resonates with younger, talented players like a Victor Oladipo or Will Sheehey.

Now is Indiana the best team in the Big Ten? That label probably still fits Ohio State right now. But the Hoosiers are one of only two unbeaten teams in the conference at the moment (the other is Illinois, who is 10-0). Indiana is definitely a team that is capable of finishing in the league's upper half this season and being in a prime position to play in the NCAA Tournament. Yes, that's now a realistic expectation for this program again given the way it has started this season.

That is why the Hoosiers' win over Kentucky this past weekend is so significant. The progress Indiana fans were hoping to see under Crean is finally occurring, and the results of this progress are eye-opening to say the least.

Meanwhile, it appears Assembly Hall just became an even more

challenging arena to play in for the opposition now.