

# 1/9/2012: State of the Big Ten, Volume 50 (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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On Jan. 7, Penn State formally introduced New England Patriots offensive coordinator Bill O'Brien as its new head football coach. This introduction came nearly two months to the day former head coach Joe Paterno was fired in light of the child sex abuse scandal involving former defensive coordinator Jerry Sandusky.

Many different viewpoints have been expressed over the last couple of months, but a couple of things remain clear. One is that as much as Penn State would like to sweep everything that took place under the rug, that just isn't going to happen and thinking that finally naming a new football coach brings any type of closure to the situation couldn't be further from the truth.

Penn State, at one time, was considered to be among the most highly-coveted head coaching jobs in all of football whenever the day came that Paterno was no longer at the forefront. For the school to end up hiring an NFL assistant who has never been a head coach at the collegiate or pro level and who was an assistant at three different ACC schools not named Florida State, Miami or Virginia Tech speaks volumes to just how toxic this situation still is.

It was difficult enough on the current players to see three different teams they beat leap over them in the bowl pecking order for something they had nothing to do with. Ending up with someone whose most recent claim to fame was a sideline blow-up with Tom Brady was definitely not what people in State College thought would take place.

Now O'Brien could very well end up being a solid hire for the Nittany Lions. It sounds as though at least a few assistant coaches from the previous regime will stick around, which could actually be somewhat beneficial to O'Brien, who prior to this past weekend had no ties to Penn State whatsoever.

But with that being said, it's becoming clear that more of those who are former players and have strong ties to the university are dissatisfied with the whole hiring process and it resulting in O'Brien taking over than those who are content with it. It's one thing to be upset with the process, which took nearly two months and was as secretive to the outside world as Paterno was. But the one thing Penn State got right was hiring someone with no previous ties to Paterno. It had to start anew.

It remains to be seen whether Nittany Lion fans ultimately give O'Brien a fair shake. Right now, it's hard to envision the man lasting that long as head coach, not because of wins and losses, but because of the fact that this whole mess will continue to follow Penn State for years. Sure, there might be a day when closure finally takes place, but that day isn't happening anytime soon. Heck, someone else might succeed O'Brien as head coach before that day comes.

Part of the reason O'Brien was hired was because those who oversaw the hiring considered him to be a man of integrity. While that's noble to say and there's (at least right now) no reason to think O'Brien isn't an admirable human being, it also means that even the most minor slip-up O'Brien makes on or off the field will be magnified nationally.

Right now, he's basically in a position to fail at a place where failure can't afford to happen. Failure on the field would lead to fan apathy. Failure off the field would put Penn State in even more of a negative light, which seems nearly impossible given everything that has gone on.

Time will tell if O'Brien proves to be the right guy for the job. Hopefully Penn State fans keep things in perspective and give him a fair chance, because there could be plenty of things beyond O'Brien's control that could ultimately dictate the future of the football program and the university.