

1/30/2012: State of the Big Ten, Volume 53 (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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With the majority of the Big Ten sitting at the halfway point of the conference schedule, the contenders have slowly but surely begun to separate themselves from the pretenders.

Just two weeks ago, the Big Ten looked about as unpredictable as one could envision it being without having any pre-conceived notions beforehand. Now, it appears that 4-5 teams remain in terms of having a legitimate chance to win what many believe to be the deepest conference in college basketball.

Entering Monday, No. 3 Ohio State found itself alone in the first place after beating Michigan at home over the weekend. The Buckeyes are the highest-ranked Big Ten squad among the five in the most recent top 25, and for good reason. Right now, Ohio State has proven to live up to its reputation as the top dog in the league.

The one team with the best opportunity of hanging neck-and-neck with the Buckeyes between now and the week of the Big Ten Tournament is Michigan State, who is now ranked ninth nationally. The Spartans have yet to play Ohio State and will face the Buckeyes twice, including the regular-season finale on March 4 at the Breslin Center.

In addition, Michigan State still has home games left against both Michigan on Super Bowl Sunday and against Wisconsin on Feb. 16. As long as the Spartans hold serve on their home court – and there's no reason to think they can't – they'll remain in the thick of the conference race.

Speaking of the 23rd-ranked Wolverines and 19th-ranked Badgers, these might be the next two teams in line. Both have huge contests coming up this week. Michigan has an opportunity to sweep the Spartans, get payback against Ohio State, and it already possesses the head-to-head over Wisconsin. But beforehand, the Wolverines will be looking to avenge an earlier loss to Indiana this season when they face the Hoosiers at Crisler Arena.

And then there's the Badgers, who bounced back from a 1-3 start to conference play to win five straight and now sit in a position to possibly be in first place by the end of the week with victories at Penn State and then at home against Ohio State. This is a golden opportunity for the Badgers this week and how they fare in these next two games could go a long way in dictating where they stand come Big Ten tournament time.

Indiana, who now sits at 20th, has a chance to put itself in this conversation, but the Hoosiers have big trips this week to both Ann Arbor and West Lafayette. Win these next two road games, and Indiana's back in the discussion. Split or lose both of these games, and the Hoosiers will probably be playing in the first round of the Big Ten Tournament.

These five teams have all personified throughout the season thus far just how grueling the Big Ten actually is. That's not to say other Big Ten teams won't be dancing next month, either. But it has reached the point where these are the teams distinguishing themselves from the pack, and thus are the ones that deserve to be further examined over the course of the next month.