

3/5/2012: State of the Big Ten, Volume 58 (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 second time in three seasons, the Big Ten found itself with a three-way tie for its regular season championship as Michigan State, Michigan and Ohio State all finished 13-5 in conference play.

What makes this year's triad of champions even more remarkable is that unlike the three-way tie that occurred during the 2009-10 season, all three teams tied this season went 1-1 against each other. The Buckeyes went into the Breslin Center in East Lansing, Mich., and walked out 72-70 winners over the Spartans.

That game on March 4 cost Michigan State an outright title and allowed both Ohio State and Michigan to join them. The Spartans still managed to secure the top seed in this week's Big Ten Tournament due to tiebreakers, but considering they were two games ahead of both the Wolverines and Buckeyes with two games left and couldn't separate themselves from those two teams, the season ended on a sour note.

While Michigan State backed its way into this three-way tie, Michigan and Ohio State both found themselves having to win a pair of road games in order for what transpired to even be a possibility. The Wolverines had games at Illinois and Penn

State, while the Buckeyes played at Northwestern and Michigan State. Michigan hadn't beaten the Fighting Illini at Assembly Hall since the 1994-95 season, while Ohio State found itself needing a last-second shot from Jared Sullinger to escape Welsh-Ryan Arena with a win over the Wildcats.

Then came Sunday. The Wolverines traveled to State College, Pa., and edged out Penn State, 71-65. Afterwards, the team gathered around to watch the conclusion of Ohio State/Michigan State and found themselves celebrating once the Buckeyes came away with the win.

As far as how this sets up both this week and beyond, one intriguing aspect here is that these teams could very well have difficult quarterfinal games in Indianapolis. Illinois is the No. 9 seed, but managed to beat Michigan State this year in the teams' lone meeting. Northwestern is the No. 7 seed and with a win over Minnesota would get a third crack at a Michigan team that won both meetings this season between the two in overtime. Finally, there's Purdue, who is the No. 6 seed and could very well be playing an Ohio State squad it only lost to by three points at Value City Arena in Columbus. Add in that the Boilermakers will have a bit of a crowd advantage given West Lafayette's proximity to Indianapolis, and the Buckeyes have a big challenge.

Looking beyond this week and towards the NCAA tournament, Michigan State still has a slim shot at a No. 1 seed, but would probably need to win the Big Ten Tournament this weekend in order to obtain it. Ohio State would likely secure a No. 2 seed should it win the tournament title game, or even reach the championship. Michigan is probably looking at a No. 2 or No. 3 seed depending on how it fares.

Either way, this season proved to be pretty remarkable in the Big Ten and these three teams tying for first place further suggests just how difficult the conference truly was this season.