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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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The NCAA Tournament will be held for the 74th time, and once again, the Northwestern Wildcats aren't participating.

Northwestern came as close as it has ever come to making its first ever appearance in the 68-team field, but it just wasn't meant to be. The Wildcats had a chance to boost its résumé last week at the Big Ten Tournament, but bowed out in the first round by losing to 10th-seeded Minnesota in overtime, 75-68. That loss proved to be the ultimate dagger sending Northwestern back to the NIT once again.

At the end of the day, the Wildcats just didn't meet all the criteria needed. They could've skated by without a bad loss had a team like Michigan or Ohio State had beat them instead of Minnesota. The Golden Gophers did secure a 6-seed in the NIT, but that was a game Northwestern really should have won at Bankers Life Fieldhouse in Indianapolis.

It would have been a nice story and at some point, it should eventually happen. Northwestern may have higher academic standards than most other universities, yet schools like Duke, Harvard and Vanderbilt are all in this year's NCAA tournament field, so that excuse isn't as strong as it may have been in years past.

Bill Carmody has done a better job of recruiting. John Shurna's a player that evolved into the Wildcats' all-time leading scorer this season. Northwestern also has another player in Drew Crawford that should be able to make an NBA roster someday. The future also looks bright with guards like JerShon Cobb and Dave Sobolewski, who made the Big Ten's all-freshman team.

In other words, there's plenty in place over in Evanston. Not to mention the fact that the Big Ten was widely considered to be the toughest conference in college basketball this season. There's no guarantee that moniker will stick with the league next year, so this was definitely a missed opportunity by Northwestern.

But the question now becomes two-fold. Do you continue sticking with what's in place and hope it can get you there, or do ties with Carmody end up getting cut (maybe next year, not now) because one could only get to this juncture so many times without breaking through?

Is Carmody still a long-term answer for Northwestern? He has coached there for over a decade now and while he has made the Wildcats a team people should be discussing, at what point do fans start thinking they've had enough?

Keep in mind that Northwestern didn't have a winning record in league play (8-10). Yes, the Wildcats had one win over Michigan State in league play. But that win obviously wasn't enough to put them over the top.

Right now, the outlook appears to be that Northwestern will probably be in a similar boat next season – a team that could be on the cusp of the NCAA tournament, but either might not have enough or might not do enough to get there. How much of this can those in Evanston take?

This isn't a cause to fire Carmody. Obviously, he's a good coach and a well-respected coach in the Big Ten? But look at

Bruce Weber. As highly regarded as he was, he just got fired from Illinois after nine seasons that included an appearance in the 2005 national championship game. The point is if Northwestern continues to have seasons like each of the last three, fans are going to become restless with Carmody if they aren't already.

And make no mistake: He and Tubby Smith are the two Big Ten coaches sitting on hot seats now with Weber and Doc Sadler no longer coaching at their schools.

It's an interesting time in Evanston, and it will be interesting to see what direction the Wildcats ultimately take.