

# 3/26/2012: State of the Big Ten, Volume 61 (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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Over the weekend, good news came the direction of the Minnesota men's basketball program after senior forward Trevor Mbakwe was granted a sixth year of eligibility by the NCAA. Mbakwe, who missed the majority of the 2011-12 season with a torn ACL suffered during the Old Spice Classic last November, hasn't made a decision yet as to whether or not he will use that extra year that was granted to him.

If he returns, the Golden Gophers will be a formidable contender in the Big Ten next season. This team has re-discovered itself here in March, playing a pair of games to overtime at the Big Ten Tournament, followed by winning three road games in the NIT en route to this week's semifinals and championship being held at Madison Square Garden in New York. Mbakwe averaged a double-double in points and rebounds in 2010-11, the only Big Ten player that season to do so.

A nucleus of him, junior forward Rodney Williams and freshman guard Andre Hollins gives head coach Tubby Smith something to build around next season. Whether Minnesota would've made the NCAA tournament with a healthy Mbakwe this season is unknown, but his absence from the court had an impact on this team.

But the interesting aspect here is that Minnesota is the third

school Mbakwe has been at. His career began at Marquette, where he played for current Indiana head coach Tom Crean. Mbakwe transferred to Miami Dade Community College in 2008 and after playing a season there, he transferred to Minnesota in 2009.

However, Mbakwe redshirted during the 2009-10 season as the result of felony charges of alleged assault towards a female in Miami.

Now here's where the NCAA's decision gets tricky. Most medical hardships, which is what Mbakwe was given, are granted to players like Mbakwe as the result of multiple injuries derailing two separate seasons. For example, former Iowa forward Jess Settles missed two seasons due to injury and received a sixth year.

That's not the case with Mbakwe though. His redshirt came as the result of legal issues needing to work themselves out. Those that are wondering how he could be granted this have a fair gripe since some student-athletes in other sports who do have injury-plagued playing careers aren't always as fortunate.

Since this was granted to him, Mbakwe would be wise in taking advantage of the opportunity. It would be of benefit to him because NBA teams are going to have even more concern over the injured knee if he leaves now than they will a year from now. It would also benefit his coaches and teammates at Minnesota because they're willing to make room for him and let him be the type of leader Smith envisioned him being at the start of the season before Mbakwe's injury occurred.

He now has until next month to decide whether to come back to Minnesota or go straight to the NBA. In terms of potential, there may be cons to him returning to school, but given his situation, they don't really outweigh the pros.

Again, the Golden Gophers have a chance to realistically

compete for a Big Ten crown next season if Mbakwe sticks around. If he doesn't, that's his decision. But it would call into question how he was granted the extra year of eligibility in the first place.

It would also blur the line as to what's required for receiving a medical hardship from the NCAA. Don't think for a second coaches aren't taking notice of this, because they are. Every Big Ten coach is watching this closely – not only because of the basketball ramifications at play, but the impact it has going forward if other coaches eventually find themselves in Smith's shoes with a player wanting to seek a hardship waiver.