

2012 Big Ten Media Days: Day One Observations

By Brendan Stiles

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CHICAGO, Ill. – It was an interesting day to say the least over at the Hyatt Regency McCormick Place, where the 2012 Big Ten Football Media Days kicked off on Thursday.

As I have the last few years, I compiled together a list of observations I made throughout the afternoon that I want to share in this space:

1. The elephant in the room

Let's get this out of the way now because we all knew this was going to be the hot topic of conversation Thursday – Penn State.

Earlier this week, the university saw sanctions placed on its football program that include a four-year postseason ban, reduction in scholarships and most significant of all, now has to deal with other programs being able to lure away Penn State players and allow them to be eligible this season if transfers are done early enough.

There was definitely a variety of opinions shared by Big Ten coaches on that last part, especially given how some schools have had contact in the last few days with some Penn State players. One unidentified Penn State player reached out to Iowa, prompting head coach Kirk Ferentz to send a courtesy call to Penn State coach Bill O'Brien. Michigan coach Brady Hoke admitted to glossing over Penn State's roster but not really pursuing anything beyond that.

Then there were programs such as Illinois who were identified

as having assistant coaches in State College attempting to reach out to Nittany Lion players. Even more intriguing here was that Illinois head coach Tim Beckman once worked as an assistant at Bowling Green under Ohio State coach Urban Meyer, who said Thursday he had a problem with other teams trying to lure players away from Penn State.

The question is not about whether other schools are playing by the rules because they technically are. It's more the ethics that come into play here, especially when it involves another Big Ten school.

2. Penn State going forward

Now that sanctions have been established, the question for Penn State moving forward, from a football perspective, is how O'Brien deals with all of the distractions surrounding his team.

Postseason ban aside, the Nittany Lions should still be an O.K. team in 2012 and they seem to have at least a handful of current players who have taken on leadership responsibilities that Penn State is going to need if it's going to have any success on the gridiron this fall.

As far as O'Brien goes, I think Penn State made a pretty decent hire here. Yes, he doesn't have a coaching background that jumps out at you like Urban Meyer over at Ohio State does. But O'Brien, at least to me, comes off as a guy that's a straight shooter, that's no-nonsense and that you know is going to put everything he has into this job, even though Penn State won't be able to compete for any Big Ten titles over the next four years.

This doesn't mean the Nittany Lions won't have their struggles down the road because they definitely will. But if I was a Penn State fan, I'd at least be encouraged by what O'Brien has managed to demonstrate to this point.

3. There's Bill O'Brien, and then there's Tim Beckman

Beckman did his best to steal the show Thursday. After starting his press conference by sending birthday wishes to his mother, he pulled off his best impression of Tim Tebow with the number of times he used the word "excited."

Then came two moments from his press conference that really stood out to me. First, he was asked about whether or not he had assistants out in State College, Pa., looking at Penn State players. Beckman said the following: "We were in State College, but we did not go on campus." Maybe I'm being harsh, but I find it incredibly hard to believe Illinois would send coaches out there just to call players about meeting them off campus. They'd probably be better off just staying in Champaign.

The second moment was near the end when he was asked about Illinois' rivalry with Northwestern. Beckman not only bragged it up, but referred to Northwestern as "The Team Upstate." For what it's worth, the Fighting Illini have won their last two games against the Wildcats. Sure, it's an in-state rivalry, but this would be like Tennessee trying to stir up the pot with Vanderbilt in the SEC. Just seems a bit unusual.

He might end up being a good coach for Illinois, who clearly needed to move on from Ron Zook after the Fighting Illini's 2011 season tail-spinned out of control. But that being said, it wouldn't surprise me if Beckman makes a few adversaries in the conference.

4. Leaders Division perception

Look, I get why Wisconsin has become a prohibitive favorite to win the Leaders Division now. With two of its biggest threats both being ineligible to play in the Big Ten title game, the Badgers could conceivably finish third in the Leaders and still be allowed to play in Indianapolis on Dec. 1.

On paper, Wisconsin is a more talented team than the other three teams in that division. The Badgers have played in the Rose Bowl two straight years now and return running back Montee Ball, who only compiled 39 all-purpose touchdowns last season and was a Heisman Trophy finalist.

I get all that. However, I'm not as sold on the Badgers as some might be. Keep in mind they did lose Paul Chryst, who left his post as Wisconsin's offensive coordinator to become the head coach at Pittsburgh. I also don't think landing Maryland transfer Danny O'Brien carries the same significance as Wisconsin getting Russell Wilson last year. Anyone who watched Wilson play at North Carolina State knew he'd be a game-changer and most suspicions about him and Wisconsin at this time last year came to fruition. I just don't feel the same about O'Brien, who played on a Maryland team that really wasn't that good last season.

If there's one team in that division that I think could dethrone the Badgers, it's Purdue. I like what Danny Hope is doing there and the personnel is there for the Boilermakers to have a pretty good season. They also open Big Ten play with two straight home games against Michigan and, yes, Wisconsin. So we're going to learn a lot about Purdue by mid-October. If the Boilermakers could win even one of those games – or if they don't win either, but manage to win at Notre Dame on Sept. 8 – they could be an 8-9 win team this season.

5. A down year?

I'll be honest: The more I think about this upcoming season, this could be an ugly year for the Big Ten as a whole.

In addition to the fact that there are now two teams – who play in the same division no less – ineligible for postseason play, I just think this is going to be a year where any negative stigma surrounding this conference isn't going to just disappear.

Right now, I think Michigan has to be the favorite to win not only the Legends Division, but the Big Ten Championship Game as well and represent the conference in the Rose Bowl on New Year's Day. But with that being said, it wouldn't surprise me one bit if the Wolverines head to Pasadena with a 9-4 record. I'm not saying it will happen, but four of the biggest games on Michigan's schedule this season – Alabama, Notre Dame, Nebraska and Ohio State – are all being played away from The Big House and it's not unrealistic to think it could lose all four of those games. But because only two of those games are in league play, losing all these games doesn't completely diminish its odds of winning the Big Ten.

As far as the rest of the conference goes, I'll just say this: If the Big Ten does only feature one team in a BCS game this season, it still might not fill its entire bowl allotment. I think this season is one where there are going to be a lot of teams who fall between the 6-8 win range and I don't really see any one team completely separating itself from the pack.

Oh, and there's also that thing about the conference struggling in bowl games, which I'm sure will be a hot topic again come December.

6. What would have been my preseason ballot

Last year, the Big Ten completely changed its preseason ballots for the media at these things. I personally liked the old way of being able to vote on teams that would win the conference (or in this case, divisions) and submit who would've been my preseason Offensive and Defensive Players of the Year. So here's what would've been my list:

- LEGENDS DIVISION – Michigan
- LEADERS DIVISION – Wisconsin (I actually have Wisconsin second behind Ohio State, but that postseason ban thingie...)
- OFFENSIVE PLAYER – Montee Ball, RB, Wisconsin

- DEFENSIVE PLAYER – William Gholston, DE, Michigan State