

9/10/2012: State of the Big Ten, Volume 64 (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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Two games into the 2012 season, and the Wisconsin Badgers have already undergone an assistant coaching change.

Mike Markuson, who was one of six new assistant coaches hired by head coach Bret Bielema this offseason after a bulk of his staff followed former offensive coordinator Paul Chryst to Pittsburgh, is no longer on staff after serving two games as the Badgers' offensive line coach.

This move being made in mid-September is troubling, especially considering how Wisconsin's M.O. as an offense is to pound the ball with linemen that all weigh over 300 pounds and in this year's case, feature a running back who shattered records and was a Heisman finalist last year in Montee Ball.

Coming off two straight Rose Bowl appearances, the Badgers were viewed by many to be a legitimate threat to win the Big Ten again despite all the transition that took place with Bielema's staff and despite breaking in a new quarterback. Now Wisconsin could still wind up winning the Big Ten when it's all said and done. But it looked vulnerable in a 26-21 win over Northern Iowa and got exposed in a 10-7 loss to Oregon State this past weekend.

This team has a target on its back after many spent the summer assuming the Badgers would cruise to a Leaders Division crown with Ohio State and Penn State both currently dealing with postseason bans. That target's not going to go away, even if Wisconsin continues to show struggles over the coming weeks.

All the talk of them being a lock to play in Indianapolis on Dec. 1 ought to be placed on hold if it hasn't been already. What happened in Corvallis, Ore., this past weekend could happen again when the Badgers play Big Ten teams that are probably better than Oregon State. Teams like Nebraska, Purdue, Michigan State, Ohio State to name a few.

The Badgers were only able to muster 35 yards rushing and without a dynamic quarterback like what Wisconsin had last season in Russell Wilson, opposing defenses are going to key in on stopping Ball.

If this season becomes the epic failure it's currently on course to become, the heat's going to be placed heavily on Bielema. It's one thing if he hires new coaches and rides them out the entire season. But making a coaching change after just two games is a strong indicator that bigger problems are taking place in Madison.

Markuson is going to be portrayed as a scapegoat now if Wisconsin continues to struggle running the football. But this is a gamble Bielema better hope pays off for him. Otherwise, he's going to be the one that receives the scrutiny and it would be warranted in this case.

Expectations were high in Madison entering this season and understandably so. What happened Monday might be the first sign of a Wisconsin decline taking place in 2012. It won't be surprising though if this is just the tip of the iceberg.