

9/17/2012: State of the Big Ten, Volume 65 (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

HawkeyeDrive.com

Three weeks into the 2012 college football season and the Big Ten only has three undefeated teams remaining – Ohio State, Northwestern and Minnesota. Only two of those teams are bowl-eligible this year.

That this is what the Big Ten has going for it at the moment pretty much sums matters up. It's not surprising that the Big Ten is a down conference in 2012. What is shocking is that the conference having a down year in 2012 seems so shocking to so many. Quite frankly, it's baffling that anyone couldn't see this sort of year coming.

Yes, the Big Ten had a team win a BCS bowl (Michigan) and had a team win a bowl game over a quality SEC opponent (Michigan State) last January. But those things mean so little now.

The play at the quarterback position is the first glaring contrast from the past two seasons until now. In 2010 (and even last year), this was a strength for the conference. Now, the first quarterback that comes to anyone's mind when the Big Ten's discussed is Denard Robinson, who is still known more for what he does with his feet than with his arm.

Next, consider the amount of coaching changes that have been

made. More than half of the Big Ten's head coaches when the 2010 season began are no longer coaching. As a result, teams have gone through massive changes in identity and the type of personnel being brought in. Also, the two longest-tenured head coaches – Iowa's Kirk Ferentz and Wisconsin's Bret Bielema – have undergone numerous transitions along their coaching staffs.

Another factor is parity. While it's a good thing in general for football, it's what is hurting the conference's reputation right now. There isn't that clear cut team or clear cut two or three teams that have separated themselves from the rest. For instance, leagues like the SEC and Pac-12 are so top heavy this year that they're both locks to have two teams playing in BCS bowl games this season. The same could be said about the Big 12 and even perhaps the ACC. The good teams in these conferences are all really good and are all really better than the majority of their counterparts.

Now look at the Big Ten in contrast. Perhaps if Ohio State didn't have a postseason ban, it'd look like a team that's heads and shoulders above everyone else in its division at the very least. But both Wisconsin and Purdue – probably the two best bowl-eligible teams in the Leaders Division – both have losses already and both look like they could be vulnerable more times later in the season.

As for the Legends Division, there could be a team such as Michigan this season that ends up 8-4 overall, but earns a trip to Indianapolis possessing a 6-2 conference record and then secures a trip to Pasadena with a 9-4 record. This scenario is very realistic and something that only further highlights why this conference is still being frowned upon nationally.

There were a lot of factors that led to the preseason hypothesis of the Big Ten having woes in 2012 and thus far, they've come to fruition. It really doesn't matter what

Michigan does against Notre Dame this weekend or how the division races shape up when Big Ten play gets underway Sept. 29. The conference is going to continue having a bad stigma around it for the foreseeable future and it's just something that needs to be accepted right now.

Maybe a day arises where the Big Ten is considered an elite college football conference. Just don't anticipate it happening anytime soon unless a season in the near future has each of the following: Strong quarterback play across the board, continuity along the coaching staffs and a handful of teams that clearly demonstrate on the field they're head and shoulders above the rest.