

9/24/2012: State of the Big Ten, Volume 66 (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.

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Of all the Big Ten results that took place on the gridiron this past weekend, the most puzzling occurred at Kinnick Stadium with the Iowa Hawkeyes blowing an eight-point lead in the final minute to lose 32-31 to Central Michigan. The Chippewas scored a touchdown, missed a two-point conversion that would've tied the game, then recovered an onside kick and nailed a 47-yard field goal with three seconds left to pull off the stunning comeback.

It was stunning in how the events transpired though, not stunning in that Iowa managed to lose a game in that fashion. In fact, it had an eerily similar feel to the Hawkeyes' 22-21 loss to Minnesota last season, one where Iowa was ahead 21-10 before giving up 12 unanswered points to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

The Hawkeyes are currently one of four Big Ten teams sitting at 2-2 right now, and by far, the most surprising of that bunch to be entering Big Ten play with a .500 mark. Michigan lost two games away from the Big House to teams currently ranked in the top 10. Penn State started 0-2 but has since reeled off two straight wins. Illinois did get blasted at home by Louisiana Tech last weekend, but throw in the loss to Arizona State earlier in the month and the Fighting Illini's

2-2 isn't that stunning.

Iowa's 2-2 start is a surprise though, and here's why. The Hawkeyes are about to complete a four-game home-stand Sept. 29 when it opens Big Ten play against Minnesota. Both of Iowa's losses have taken place at Kinnick Stadium, and this most recent defeat at the hands of Central Michigan was one that goes beyond head-scratching if you're a Hawkeye fan. As low as the expectations were in Iowa City entering this season (at least compared to most recent years), this team wasn't expected to be 2-2 at this point and if anyone did expect it, losing to Central Michigan at home probably wasn't a game projected as one of those two losses.

A lot of criticism has come the way of Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz and will continue to unless the Hawkeyes make a drastic turnaround in conference play. Even then, people are going to still wonder how this team lost two home games in September, one of which to a MAC team that isn't expected to fare well in that league this season.

Ferentz's seat will start to get warm and more questions are going to come his way, but the reality of the situation is he won't be fired for this season. Anyone who thinks that's even a remote possibility doesn't have a clue. For one thing, he has new coordinators on both sides of the ball, one of which was an emergency hire by the UI after former offensive coordinator Ken O'Keefe left the staff to become the Miami Dolphins' wide receivers coach.

Even more significant however is Ferentz's contract, which was revised after Iowa won the Orange Bowl three seasons ago. Ferentz is under contract up through 2020 and has a buyout north of \$20 million. That's not to say anyone in Iowa City should be satisfied with the results they've received the past two-plus seasons, but that it won't be after this season if Ferentz's tenure ever did come to an abrupt end.

Also understand that since 1979, Iowa has had two head coaches – Ferentz and his predecessor Hayden Fry. Whenever the day comes that Ferentz is no longer coaching, Iowa's not going to be in the position to one, make a bad hire, and two, hire someone that's not going to have the intent of being in Iowa City for the long haul. That's the kind of thing that would set Iowa back to what it was before Fry or Ferentz came along.

It's not so much that the Hawkeyes' season is now on the brink, but more so that their margin of error this season is thinner now than it was last week. A fair assessment of the situation can't really be made until Big Ten games have been played, and that's the case with any Big Ten school, not just Iowa.

With that being said, patience is also starting to wear thin among Hawkeye fans, even those who didn't have the bar set high for 2012. How both Iowa and Ferentz respond this season will be telling going forward.