

12/10/2012: State of the Big Ten, Volume 77 (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

In the wake of Bret Bielema leaving Wisconsin to become the new head football coach at Arkansas just three days after guiding the Badgers to their third consecutive Big Ten title, Wisconsin athletic director Barry Alvarez revealed he would coach the team in the Rose Bowl against No. 8 Stanford on New Year's Day.

As shocking as it was when the news broke of Bielema's departure, it's just as much of a non-surprise that Alvarez would assume interim duties. This is a man who not only resurrected Wisconsin football while roaming the sidelines for 16 seasons, but pretty much resurrected that entire athletics department into what it is today.

Alvarez said he approached by the team's senior captains about coaching them since he was already there and already has three Rose Bowl victories to his name. He said for that reason, he would oblige and that this would be a one-time deal.

While the Badgers prepare for their trip to Pasadena though, Alvarez has now begun the task of searching for a new head coach. Much like when he hand-selected Bielema to be his successor following the 2005 season, Alvarez's criteria is pretty select, which could be both a good and bad thing.

On one hand, it could be good in the sense that given what Bielema left behind when he went to Fayetteville, Ark., 2013 won't be a complete rebuilding project for whomever Alvarez brings on board. However, football coaches today have to show they're capable of adapting over the long term because the sport is constantly changing before our very eyes.

It's fair to wonder if Bielema ever had a fair shot to make his own mark during his seven-year stint. Yes, Wisconsin won three straight Big Ten titles on his watch, but in the eyes of Badger fans, he was no Alvarez. One thing that needs to be established now is whoever is hired will never be Alvarez. But with that being said, they do deserve a shot at making their own name.

Nick Saban is just as iconic in Alabama now as Bear Bryant was. He has won two national titles with the Crimson Tide and could be winning a third here on Jan. 7 in what would only be his sixth season in Tuscaloosa. Yes, there were 24 years between tenures, but Saban is leaving his own mark there now.

Sure, Alvarez can hire someone that shares his ideology and could basically be a clone of him. But that might not be such a good thing long term for Wisconsin. Whoever is hired needs the shot to leave his own legacy, good or bad. Alvarez is entitled to be as hands-on as he deems necessary, but being too hands-on with Bielema over the past seven years might have something to do with the situation today.

Now this doesn't have to be a hire made completely out of left field. The guy could have Wisconsin ties. Heck, he could have played for Alvarez or even coached under Alvarez. But the truth is as good as Wisconsin could be next year, it won't be as good as Ohio State or Michigan or even Nebraska.

If Alvarez hires a yes-man or someone who is too much like him, this program might struggle to adapt over the long haul. It's not a guarantee it will, but it might. The pressure to

“win now” is prevalent in Madison like it is on any other campus, which would be reasoning for going this route.

But while it might not necessarily be beneficial to pursue someone on the outside in the short-term, over time, it could pay huge dividends for Wisconsin. It did before when Alvarez first arrived in Madison, so there’s no reason to think it can’t happen again now, especially with this new coach inheriting much better circumstances than Alvarez did back in 1990.

It’s an interesting time in Wisconsin, especially with the Badgers playing in their third straight Rose Bowl in three weeks. It’s going to become even more intriguing once someone is officially in place come Jan. 2.