

# 12/31/2012: State of the Big Ten, Volume 80 (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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For all the negativity that surrounds the Big Ten around bowl season, at least in recent years anyway, there's potential for the conference to have a feel-good story of sorts New Year's Day.

One of the first bowls to kick off is the 2013 TaxSlayer.com Gator Bowl in Jacksonville, Fla. Representing the Big Ten in this game is No. 20 Northwestern, who went 9-3 this season.

The intrigue isn't so much the Wildcats being ranked or being a team that could've easily gone to the Big Ten Championship Game with a 12-0 record had they not squandered a trio of fourth-quarter leads. Northwestern has a chance to win its first bowl game since the 1949 Rose Bowl on Tuesday, and the odds of this happening appear realistic.

Yes, the Big Ten is playing the SEC and yes, the Big Ten has lost this bowl each of the last two years. But consider the circumstances. Two years ago, Michigan losing this bowl game ended up being the lasting image of Rich Rodriguez's tenure in Ann Arbor. Last year, Ohio State was in this game after one of its most disappointing seasons in school history and at a time where scandal surrounded it.

In Northwestern's case, there aren't any coaches in jeopardy. Pat Fitzgerald can probably keep that job as long as he desires. There also isn't any scandal surrounding this program.

On Tuesday, the Wildcats are playing a Mississippi State squad that quite frankly, they should beat fairly easily. Yes, Mississippi State went 8-4. But the Bulldogs didn't beat anyone with a pulse this season. They played three legitimate opponents in SEC play and got crushed by all three. Then they followed that up by laying an egg (pun intended) in the Egg Bowl against in-state foe Ole Miss.

This is a huge opportunity for the Northwestern football program. On the surface, this is a chance for Fitzgerald and his team to get a monkey off its back, if you will, that has lasted for years. Fitzgerald has spent years preaching about being able to get a bowl win. This might be as good a chance as Northwestern gets.

As far as the long term, being able to win 10 games in a season at a place like Northwestern is impressive and can potentially lead to bigger things. The pieces are in place. Kain Colter and Venric Mark are just two of the players returning in 2013, and Mark was an All-American.

The Legends Division will probably remain stacked in 2013 like it was in 2012. But Northwestern showed it was capable of holding its own. The next step for the Wildcats will be proving they can beat teams like Nebraska and Michigan, but they've done it before. Heck, they won in Lincoln in 2011 with a team that maybe was more talented, but didn't show it in terms of wins and losses.

Winning the Gator Bowl could be a long-term springboard for Fitzgerald. That's why Tuesday's game is significant. It's real and people around the Big Ten might want to at least pay attention to what's going on in Evanston over the course of

the next few years.