

# 1/7/2013: State of the Big Ten, Volume 81 (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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On this date one year ago, Penn State was introducing Bill O'Brien as its new head football coach. Monday, O'Brien held a press conference in response to speculation surrounding his future and made his intentions of coaching Penn State in 2013 clear.

Last week brought about seven head-coaching vacancies in the NFL and O'Brien acknowledged reports that he interviewed for openings with the Cleveland Browns and Philadelphia Eagles. At his press conference, he talked about the NFL being the highest level in the coaching profession.

O'Brien feeling this way about coaching is fine if that's how he really feels. But what that comment did was open a Pandora's Box for Penn State while its football program continues to deal with the sanctions delivered to it last summer. Now every year, his name's going to continue to come up whenever there's a coaching vacancy in the NFL and his comment now casts doubt as to whether he'll ultimately see Penn State through everything it's dealing with. Before last season started, he was given a four-year extension to his original contract, which now expires in 2020, four years after the Nittany Lions' postseason ban gets lifted.

When he was first hired by Penn State, O'Brien's integrity was considered a significant factor. As the Nittany Lions went through an 8-4 season last year, fans began to embrace O'Brien much like they did his predecessor. Likewise, O'Brien has given off the vibe of being loyal to Penn State and more specifically, to his players and coaching staff.

With that being said though, his reputation took a hit this past week. Yes, he may not have been offered either job he interviewed for, but his name coming up led to Penn State recruits questioning whether that loyalty still existed. And when considering how this program already has scholarship reductions to deal with and current players still being allowed to leave anytime between now and the start of fall camp, NFL speculation surrounding O'Brien is only going to do further damage to future recruiting classes he does assemble at Penn State.

O'Brien sat in front of reporters Monday in State College saying how it isn't about money and that he's all about making structural changes to the program that could benefit it long-term. Both of those things might indeed be true. But what if those structural changes don't happen or aren't able to happen? Is this a ploy he's going to continue using?

Penn State fans might not have anything to worry about right this minute as far as O'Brien's tenure with the Nittany Lions is concerned. But this is going to come up again next year and if O'Brien stays around in 2014, it will come up again in two years. When this does becoming a recurring topic every January, he's not going to have anyone to blame but himself.

Will O'Brien stay at Penn State for the foreseeable future and at least through the postseason ban? The odds of him doing so are still higher than if he doesn't. But it's no longer as much of a certainty.

Basically, it comes down to this: If he leaves Penn State, he

leaves. If that day comes sooner than expected, there's a time and place for him to pursue those NFL aspirations. It just wasn't right now, not while Penn State's image remains fragile.