

# 1/28/2013: State of the Big Ten, Volume 84 (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*

All season long, the talk in the world of college basketball has been how the Big Ten is viewed by many to be the toughest conference on a national scale. On Feb. 2, the league gets an opportunity to showcase itself in a manner that doesn't occur often.

Indiana and Michigan were both considered back in October to be the two top contenders to win the Big Ten and thus far, both teams have lived up to the billing. The two are tied atop the standings with 6-1 marks and are currently ranked in the top 3 nationally. Which is why Saturday evening has the potential to be special.

These two squads will meet inside Indiana's Assembly Hall, in front of a nationally televised audience on ESPN. Michigan enters ranked No. 1 in the AP poll for the first time since the "Fab 5" era 20 years ago. That alone warrants plenty of headlines as it speaks to the job John Beilein has done in six years as the Wolverines' head coach.

Then there are the Hoosiers, who were the preseason No. 1 and enter this contest ranked third in both the AP and Coaches Polls. They have yet to lose on their home floor.

Saturday night has the potential to be one of the best college basketball games this entire season, in any conference. Both squads feature sophomores that are worthy candidates for National Player of the Year honors (Trey Burke for Michigan and Cody Zeller for Indiana). Both have a plethora of NBA talent in their arsenals.

With all due respect to Michigan State, who might very well have the Big Ten's Coach of the Year right now in Tom Izzo, the Wolverines and Hoosiers are the two best teams in this league. They'll meet again on the final day of the regular season in Ann Arbor and that will probably hold greater significance down the road.

But this one in Bloomington's going to be special. Assembly Hall is far and away the best college basketball environment in the Big Ten and is among the best in the entire country. Indiana sold out home games in Tom Crean's early seasons when the Hoosiers were in complete rebuild mode. Now the crowds there are becoming an even greater factor for Indiana as it continues ascending into a legitimate Final Four-caliber squad.

It may only be one game, but again, this is going to be a night where the spotlight is on the Big Ten. The last time it had this type of spotlight was when Ohio State played Wisconsin in 2007, and that game proved to be a slugfest.

Both Michigan and Indiana like to run and are capable of dropping 80-90 points on anyone at any given point. Now maybe this ends up being more of a low scoring game because of familiarity and because both teams have made strides defensively. But with the firepower both teams have, the ingredients that every casual observer of college basketball likes are in place.

How this game unfolds might not only define how these two teams are perceived the rest of the season, but it might very

well define the Big Ten as a conference, especially after a week where numerous teams struggled to score 50 points in contests. These are the teams at the top, so they're the ones being placed under the microscope first and how well they fare will be significant in how the conference gets judged come March.