

3/25/2013: State of the Big Ten, Volume 92 (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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Last week, it was Northwestern firing its men's basketball head coach. On Monday, Minnesota announced the dismissal of Tubby Smith, who had served as the Golden Gophers' head honcho for the past six seasons.

Smith getting fired isn't a complete shock to anyone who has followed the Big Ten closely, as it seemed inevitable. Even though Minnesota made the NCAA Tournament for the third time under Smith this season and even won a game over UCLA before losing over the weekend to Florida, there was enough smoke coming out of the Twin Cities here.

Like they had each of the past two seasons, the Golden Gophers went through a February swoon. The last two years could be pinpointed by injuries to players like Al Nolen and Trevor Mbakwe and transfers like Devoe Joseph, who finished his playing career at Oregon. A similar regression took place this winter, except this time, the excuses weren't there.

Yes, Minnesota made the NCAA Tournament. But considering how the Golden Gophers were at one point a top 10 team this season, the fact that they managed to finish below .500 in the Big Ten falls on Smith and his coaching staff. Losing games to teams like Northwestern and Nebraska and games like the ones

against Iowa and Ohio State where it was turnover after turnover are what did him in.

On the outside, it seems foolish that a team that made the NCAA Tournament would fire its head coach for something that wasn't an NCAA violation of some sort. But look closer at the state of the Minnesota basketball program and it was clear the time to make a change was now.

Two things said by athletics director Norwood Teague stood out from the school's press conference Monday afternoon. The first thing is that he didn't make the decision to fire Smith on Monday. This indicates the decision was made long before rumblings ever saw the light of day in Minneapolis.

The second thing (and more important point, really) was that Teague said Minnesota wouldn't be using a search firm, which is what Northwestern is doing right now with its ongoing coaching search. Considering that Teague came to Minnesota from VCU, the dots are pretty easy to connect here.

Make no mistake here. Teague's Plan A is VCU head coach Shaka Smart and he isn't going through this process right now if he didn't think he had a good shot of luring Smart out of Richmond, Va. Now this doesn't mean Smart will leave VCU, but there's no question he'll at least listen to the guy who gave him his first big opportunity in the business.

If Teague whiffs on Smart, at least Minnesota fans can take solace in the fact that he's trying because the ball's about to be in Smart's court here. Since a search firm isn't being used, this hire – Smart or not Smart – is being made soon. It has to. The longer this drags out, the more foolish Teague and Minnesota would look.

A lot still has to occur for the Golden Gophers to be a perennial contender of any sort in the Big Ten and no matter who replaces Smith, they're in for a long season next year. But this is a start for Minnesota. For Teague, this is a

chance to make that first big hire that will define him as the school's athletics director. There's no reason to think he hasn't done his due diligence.