

# Most intriguing Big Ten football games of 2013 (premium)

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With the college football season kicking off four weeks from now, I thought it'd be worthwhile now to look at the entire Big Ten schedule and pinpoint the games that should prove to be most intriguing and most significant in terms of the conference's perception in 2013.

This isn't necessarily a list of the best games each week, but ones that I believe could make a difference in one way or another for various teams across the conference.

## **Week 1 (8/29/2013-8/31/2013): *Northern Illinois at Iowa***

The first Saturday of the season provides plenty of intrigue with match-ups like Northwestern visiting California, Purdue playing at Cincinnati and Penn State playing against Syracuse at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J. While the Nittany Lions' game versus the Orange intrigues because of Penn State entering the year as a complete wild-card while continuing to deal with sanctions, Iowa's contest against Northern Illinois at Kinnick Stadium grabs my attention more than any other this first weekend.

Yes, the Hawkeyes are coming off a 4-8 season in 2012, but one of those four victories came in Chicago against Northern Illinois and as it turned out, that was the only regular-season game the Huskies would lose all season en route to a second straight MAC title and a trip to the Orange Bowl against Florida State. Northern Illinois brings back

quarterback Jordan Lynch, who had a 73-yard touchdown run in last year's showdown with Iowa. Meanwhile, the Hawkeyes' new signal-caller remains undecided entering fall camp.

Given how much tougher Iowa's schedule is in 2013 as opposed to a year ago, this is the kind of game that could dictate whether the Hawkeyes bounce back this season and earn a bowl trip of some kind or find themselves staying home again for the holidays like they did last winter.

## **Week 2 (9/7/2013): *Cincinnati at Illinois***

Michigan's game against Notre Dame is by far the best game on this Saturday involving a Big Ten opponent. But I'm pinpointing Illinois' contest against Cincinnati here for a couple of reasons.

The Bearcats were good last year under Butch Jones and will probably be decent again this season under their new head coach, Tommy Tuberville. But if the Fighting Illini are going to develop any kind of momentum under second-year head coach Tim Beckman, winning a game like this at home could give Illinois some much-needed confidence entering its game against Washington the following week at Soldier Field in Chicago.

Not to mention that at least on paper, the Fighting Illini will likely be underdogs in all four of their home games during Big Ten play this season – Wisconsin, Michigan State, Ohio State and Northwestern all visit Memorial Stadium. Part of this also hinges on how Cincinnati does at home against Purdue the week prior, but I look at this as the type of game that could be a potential springboard for Illinois and more importantly for Beckman if it were to somehow win.

## **Week 3 (9/14/2013): *Ohio State at California***

Honestly, I think Nebraska probably has the most at stake during this week when it plays UCLA at home, mainly because the Bruins absolutely ran all over the Cornhuskers' defense

last year in Pasadena. But the most intrigue comes in another Big Ten/Pac-12 battle (one of four on this date) when the Buckeyes visit Cal over in Berkeley.

For starters, these teams met last season in Columbus and while Ohio State managed to win, the Golden Bears provided more of a challenge than anyone anticipated. Now Cal has a new head coach in Sonny Dykes, who coached a high-octaned offense in Louisiana Tech last season. This is also the Buckeyes' first road contest of 2013 and one of three games that we currently know for certain they will play without the services of running back Carlos Hyde. It's also worth keeping in mind that the Golden Bears will also be two weeks removed from playing another quality Big Ten opponent at home in Northwestern.

On paper, the Buckeyes should win this game because Cal will probably struggle once it dives into conference play, especially in a division that features the likes of Oregon, Stanford and Oregon State. But I do think Ohio State could be tested heavily here and this is the type of game that people are going to look back at should the Buckeyes meet the many outside expectations of them that there will be and that there already are.

#### **Week 4 (9/21/2013): *Missouri at Indiana***

In years past, Week Four has usually consisted of stinkers as most Big Ten teams look to play a cupcake before diving into league play. This year's Week Four slate is decent in that it actually involves one conference game featuring two new head coaches – Darrell Hazell (Purdue) and Gary Andersen (Wisconsin). It also features Michigan State playing at Notre Dame and Michigan making an unusual road trip to Connecticut.

But the game I want to focus on is Indiana's contest against Missouri, which has already been slated for prime time by the Big Ten Network. Yes, Missouri's in the bottom rung of SEC

teams entering 2013 and not what it once was in the Big 12 under Gary Pinkel. But keep the Big 12 thing in mind here because there's familiarity between Pinkel and Indiana head coach Kevin Wilson, who was Oklahoma's offensive coordinator back when Missouri was in the Big 12 and playing marquee games year after year against the Sooners.

This will also be the Hoosiers' fourth straight game at home. They play eight home games at Memorial Stadium this season, including all four of their non-conference games. Indiana's also being regarded as a team on the rise in the Big Ten, even with an absolutely brutal road slate in league play. Simply put, the Hoosiers will be in the spotlight here, albeit against a below-average SEC opponent. But Big Ten/SEC regular season games are scarce to begin with and this game could potentially make a difference not only in whether Indiana makes a bowl in 2013, but whether it does so as a 6-6 team or as a team that could go 7-5 or even 8-4.

#### **Week 5 (9/28/2013): *Wisconsin at Ohio State***

There are four games involving Big Ten teams this week, two of which are conference games. I almost went with the other league match-up – Iowa at Minnesota – because the winner probably avoids the cellar of the Legends Division and dramatically increases its likelihood of a bowl appearance in 2013. But this game between the Badgers and Buckeyes is just too difficult to ignore, especially because recent meetings between these two teams have been memorable in some shape or fashion.

Last year, Ohio State won in overtime at Camp Randall Stadium. But because the undefeated Buckeyes had a postseason ban, Wisconsin reaped the reward and ended up winning the Big Ten Championship Game. Also throw in the familiarity between the two head coaches. Gary Andersen might be in his first season at Wisconsin, but he was an assistant once upon a time at Utah on Urban Meyer's staff before Meyer left for Florida and now

Ohio State.

Even if the Badgers don't come into the Horseshoe undefeated, two things could be in their favor beforehand. The first is having already played a road night game two weeks prior at Arizona State, who will be a contender this season in the Pac-12 South. The other is being a game into Big Ten play already as Wisconsin plays Purdue the week before at home while everyone else is still playing non-conference. Ohio State will likely be favored, especially since it's at home and the better team right now. But this is the kind of game fans will want to tune into regardless.

### **Week 6 (10/5/2013): *Ohio State at Northwestern***

This is one of the most important games in the Big Ten this season and in the case of Northwestern, there might not be a bigger game in its program's history, especially if the Wildcats get through their non-conference portion undefeated.

Northwestern won 10 games last year, including its first bowl victory since 1949, and has ridden a ton of momentum through this offseason. Gary Barnett brought this program to consecutive Big Ten titles in the 1990s, but Pat Fitzgerald is taking it into uncharted waters. The Wildcats' 2013 schedule is nothing short of brutal, yet this might be as deep and talented a team as Fitzgerald has ever had in Evanston. In my mind, the build-up that will likely surround this game will parallel the build-up back when Iowa played Ohio State at Kinnick Stadium in 2006. If Northwestern somehow wins this game, everyone will take notice and the Wildcats suddenly become a clear favorite to win the Legends Division.

Conversely, this game could also have huge ramifications for Ohio State if it manages to win those aforementioned contests against Cal and Wisconsin in September. This is easily the biggest test standing between the Buckeyes and that Nov. 30 edition of "The Game" up in Ann Arbor. Should Ohio State enter

this contest 5-0 and then proceed to leave Ryan Field 6-0, the Buckeyes will probably be 11-0 when they meet Michigan in that regular season finale. There aren't too many opportunities for signature wins this season for Ohio State, but there's no question this would be one of them.

### **Week 7 (10/12/2013): *Indiana at Michigan State***

There are four Big Ten games on this Saturday and all four present a little intrigue. Nebraska plays its first road game at Purdue, Michigan travels to Penn State and Northwestern plays at Wisconsin. But I want to focus here on the Old Brass Spittoon battle between Indiana and Michigan State that will be played at Spartan Stadium.

First of all, think back to last year's game. Michigan State ended up 6-6 (7-6 after winning its bowl game) and one of those victories was the Spartans overcoming an early 17-0 deficit to win at Indiana 31-27. That game was right there for the Hoosiers' taking. Now let's look at this year's game. It's the first road contest for Indiana in 2013 after opening with five straight home games and as I mentioned before, the Hoosiers' road slate this season is absolutely brutal. If Indiana finds a way to leave East Lansing with a victory, it will be heavily noticed.

As for Michigan State, this is a game the Spartans will probably be favored in regardless and if they're going to have any real shot at winning the Legends Division this season, they have to be able to rack up wins in October playing this game, at Iowa, Purdue at home and at Illinois. This game features one of the conference's top offenses versus one of its best defenses. The winner of this game is probably looking at a 7-8 win season in 2013 if everything else were to go as expected.

### **Week 8 (10/19/2013): *Iowa at Ohio State***

If there's any blah week in the Big Ten this season, it's this

one. But I find a couple of things intriguing about this match-up between the Hawkeyes and Buckeyes.

For starters, both teams will be coming off byes the week before, so the whole notion of whether rest leads to potential rust comes into play is canceled out. From Iowa's perspective, the Hawkeyes play five teams ranked in the top 25 of the preseason Coaches Poll recently released and this is the first contest. Five of Iowa's last six games are against teams that will likely be ranked when the Hawkeyes play them after Iowa only played two ranked teams all of last season, both taking place in its final two games of 2012.

I'm curious to see how Ohio State responds here because it should be an overwhelming favorite to win this game. How much of a hangover could there still be from playing both Wisconsin and Northwestern beforehand? That remains to be seen. But it's worth pointing out that Ohio State's bye week last season came before its overtime win at Wisconsin, and Iowa under Kirk Ferentz is at its best when it's able to do things similarly to what the Badgers did under former head coach Bret Bielema. By no means should anyone expect this game to be like the instant classic these teams played at the Horseshoe back in 2009, but it shouldn't be too much of a surprise if Iowa (assuming it enters this game in relatively decent shape) gives Ohio State just a little more than Buckeye fans bargain for.

#### **Week 9 (10/26/2013): *Nebraska at Minnesota***

If there's any sort of trap game on Nebraska's 2013 schedule, it's right here when the Cornhuskers visit TCF Bank Stadium to play Minnesota. Nebraska will be coming its bye week and this game comes up right before the Cornhuskers start a very brutal November slate that will determine whether they repeat as Legends Division champions or not.

Meanwhile, Minnesota has a brutal Big Ten schedule as a whole

in 2013 and this is the Golden Gophers' lone home game during the month of October. This comes after a three-week stretch that features a bye sandwiched between trips to Michigan and Northwestern. I'll be very curious to see what Minnesota's psyche looks like when it enters this contest because it could very well determine whether the Golden Gophers make a second straight bowl game under third-year head coach Jerry Kill.

Nebraska's a better team and should probably win this game with ease like it has the last two times it has played Minnesota. But I'm telling you, this (at the very least) has all the ingredients in place to be considered a trap game and it would make quite a statement if the Golden Gophers found a way to win this one.

#### **Week 10 (11/2/2013): *Michigan at Michigan State***

I could easily make a case for the game between Northwestern and Nebraska here as well, but the Big Ten game that will likely have everyone's attention this particular weekend is this one in East Lansing.

After Michigan State reeled off four straight victories in this intrastate rivalry, Michigan finally ended that losing streak to the Spartans last season winning at home on a last-second field goal. The Wolverines' last victory at Spartan Stadium came in 2007, which was Mark Dantonio's first season as Michigan State's head coach. The other intriguing aspect here is these teams historically have met in October, so having this game the first weekend of November could potentially lead to bigger stakes for both teams than they're accustomed to when they play each other.

While I don't think this actually happens, it isn't completely unrealistic to imagine both the Wolverines and Spartans being undefeated beforehand. Frankly, I'd be surprised if either team is worse than 5-2 coming into this game. Both play Notre Dame in September and both have difficult road games in league



play beforehand with Michigan State visiting Iowa on Oct. 5 and Michigan playing at Penn State the following Saturday. Both programs will likely be in the discussion for winning the Legends Division and this is a rivalry that really might be at its height right now, so it should make for an entertaining football game.

#### **Week 11 (11/9/2013): *Nebraska at Michigan***

If both Nebraska and Michigan enter this match-up coming off victories the week prior, then this is the game that will likely decide who wins the Legends Division and plays in Indianapolis next December because the potential is there for this to be a showdown of 8-0 teams.

From Nebraska's perspective, I believe this to be the most difficult game on its schedule, period. The Cornhuskers will have played against UCLA and Northwestern beforehand, but both of those games are in Lincoln. This is easily the toughest road game on their schedule (no offense to Penn State). Meanwhile, this is merely another big November game for Michigan and for the second straight year, the Wolverines play Nebraska the week after playing Michigan State.

These are two teams that seem to parallel one another coming into this season, which is why I feel the stakes are going to be extremely high when they meet up. Even if both teams enter this game with blemishes to their records, the stakes will be big because it's Nebraska against Michigan and it also happens to be the last regular-season meeting between these teams until 2018 at the earliest.

#### **Week 12 (11/16/2013): *Michigan State at Nebraska***

This is a real toss-up right now because both this game and the one being played in Evanston between Michigan and Northwestern could be equally intriguing and a lot will likely depend on what happens the previous two weeks. But for the sake of this, I'll make the case for this game in Lincoln

between Michigan State and Nebraska.

One thing to consider off the bat, the Cornhuskers were aided by a missed call in last year's game that allowed them to leave East Lansing with a one-point win over the Spartans. The year before, Nebraska handed Michigan State its lone Big Ten defeat prior to playing Wisconsin in that inaugural Big Ten title game. These are the two teams that have won Legends Division crowns since division play entered the Big Ten.

The other thing to consider is that the Spartans will be coming off a bye week while the Cornhuskers will have played the week before in Ann Arbor against Michigan, so how this game starts could be big. What type of momentum is carried into this game if either beats Michigan earlier in the month? In my eyes, this game has just a bit more luster than Michigan/Northwestern, but I won't be surprised if both turn out to be marquee games that go down to the wire.

### **Week 13 (11/23/2013): *Michigan State at Northwestern***

I feel like I've completely ignored the Leaders Division here, but all the compelling Legends Division match-ups are happening in November this season. A case could be made for Nebraska's game at Penn State being bigger (especially if the Cornhuskers beat both of these teams at home earlier in the month). But if either Michigan State or Northwestern gets wins against either or both of Michigan and Nebraska, this game becomes huge.

Before this game, both teams will have had Novembers consisting of bye weeks, home games against Michigan and road trips to Nebraska. Michigan State has a slightly easier schedule, especially in Big Ten play, than Northwestern does. But I feel as though these teams could be on very equal footing here as both also end the season with very winnable games the following week.

Even if the Legends Division doesn't end up being at stake

here, bowl positioning will likely be affected. Northwestern found itself in the Gator Bowl and securing that first bowl victory in 60-plus years in large part because it won at Michigan State late last season. If neither wins their division, both these teams will likely have similar records, so the winner is at the very least going to play in a more marquee bowl game this winter.

**Week 14 (11/29/2013-11/30/2013): *Ohio State at Michigan***

As if there was any doubt here what the most intriguing/significant game of the regular season's final weekend will be. Right now, these two are being viewed nationally as the two best teams in the conference once again and the storyline here will be whether this is the first of two consecutive meetings between these teams.

Next year when the Big Ten realigns its divisions upon the arrivals of Maryland and Rutgers into the conference, Michigan and Ohio State will share the same division after being apart the last three years. In other words, this is the Big Ten's best (and perhaps only) chance of getting a championship game at Lucas Oil Stadium involving these two teams the following week.

Since Brady Hoke's arrival at Michigan two years ago, this storied rivalry has produced compelling games and the animosity between the two programs has arguably gotten as strong as it once was back when it was the "Big Two, Little Eight." Even if the 2013 Big Ten Championship Game doesn't feature a rematch between these two teams, there's still going to be plenty at stake for both schools when they meet in the Big House.