

9/23/2013: State of the Big Ten, Volume 99 (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.

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Right in the heart of the Big Ten's football season, there is basketball worth discussing. This is because for the first time, the NCAA is allowing all Division-I programs to start conducting official team practices in the month of September.

That's right. On Sept. 27 (Friday), all 12 Big Ten men's basketball programs will be allowed to begin preparations for the 2013-14 season. This is new and perhaps beneficial to the game of college basketball.

Honestly, there are certain things the sport is doing (or is now being allowed to do, anyway) that make sense. Last year, coaches were allowed to have interaction with their current players during summer workouts of up to two hours per week. Before 2012, it was just like football in that the only coaches allowed to have any type of interaction were strength and conditioning coaches. Now they're being allowed to conduct practices earlier in the year.

This is better for the entire game because now instead of coaches having to condense a bunch of practices into a 2-3 week span before playing exhibitions or having closed scrimmages, they can spread practices out and not have to worry about overexerting any players.

Doing this allows true freshmen to get even more acclimated to their environments and establish even more of a comfort zone. In theory, this should also enable them to have more of an immediate impact for their teams in contrast to having to wait until they're completely settled in. Considering the amount of players who leave school early (at least those that have a legitimate shot at the NBA), this improves the product at the collegiate level.

The schools with the NBA talent benefit. The schools that don't also benefit because moving up practice dates allows them to develop more team cohesion before playing that first game. A conference like the Big Ten that's already considered strong to begin with is going to stay that way because the depth of the league improves as a result of this.

Schools like Minnesota and Northwestern who are breaking in new head coaches are going to benefit because now Richard Pitino and Chris Collins have more time to get players to buy into what they're selling. Programs on the cusp of making the NCAA tournament like Iowa benefit because the team cohesion it can develop (and frankly already has during the offseason) is going to pay off late in the season, whether the Hawkeyes are a bubble team again or in a legitimate position to compete for a Big Ten crown.

Then there are those like Michigan State who will have national title aspirations this season. Tom Izzo has even more of an opportunity to mold his team into the identity he wants it to have and that should only make a team like the Spartans more of a threat come March.

The Big Ten might not be as loaded now as it was in 2012-13, but it should have more depth and this early start time for team practices is only going to illustrate that more throughout the course of the winter. This is good for the sport.