

# 9/30/2013: State of the Big Ten, Volume 100 (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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In five days, the entire college football universe will lay its eyes squarely on Ryan Field in Evanston, Ill., for what is the biggest Northwestern football game in years.

Make no mistake about this. When the 16th-ranked Wildcats take the field to play No. 4 Ohio State, it will certainly be the biggest game Northwestern has played since Pat Fitzgerald took over for the late Randy Walkers as head coach in 2006. This game is going to be a watershed moment for Fitzgerald's program, one that will either pay huge dividends should the Wildcats win or provide consequences should they lose.

Northwestern has accomplished an unprecedented amount of consistency during Fitzgerald's tenure, which is at its peak right now with the Wildcats starting this season 4-0 after winning 10 games a year ago and finally getting over that bowl drought of 64 years that stuck with the program. This is as good as Northwestern has had it in over a decade and Saturday's contest is the most significant contest to be played at Ryan Field in years.

Sure, the Wildcats have played a game at Wrigley Field back in 2010. But no marketing is needed for this game on Saturday. The quality of the two teams speaks for itself here and it

doesn't matter where the game's being played. Northwestern (at least historically) might not bring in the best crowds on game days, but with this weekend being the school's homecoming, plenty of alumni will flock to Evanston knowing full well the magnitude this has on Fitzgerald and his program going forward.

Here is what's at stake in the short-term: Beat the Buckeyes, and Northwestern becomes the clear favorite to win the Legends Division and quite possibly set up a rematch with Ohio State on Dec. 7 in Indianapolis. Lose to the Buckeyes, and the schedule becomes a bit more daunting and record-wise, a step back to something like 7-5 wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility.

Now for the long-term effects: Win this game, and the momentum currently surrounding the Wildcats will only get bigger. More people in the entire Chicagoland area will take notice, bigger-named recruits (should they qualify) would be more likely to commit and with division realignment going into effect next year, this could potentially set up where Northwestern becomes a viable contender in the West division for the next 4-5 years and possibly longer if Fitzgerald stays around.

But lose this game, and the perception that has been around the program for years not only comes back, but would return stronger than ever. It will be said that Northwestern can't win the big ones and years like 2012 will be more the exception as opposed to the norm for Fitzgerald. Speculation would build up even more with Fitzgerald, as many national media types will wonder why he'd want to stay at Northwestern (his alma mater) if the ceiling is nothing more than maybe 8-4 on average.

This is a chance for Northwestern to take a monster step forward not only in the Big Ten, but nationally as a football program. Everyone will be watching Saturday night. The

question now is this – are the Wildcats ready to take that next step in this line of consistency they've been on the last few years? The outcome of Saturday night's game is going to go a long way in determining that – win or lose.