

COMMENTARY: Unintentional cross-protected games stand out

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While glossing over the Big Ten football schedules for 2018 and 2019 that were released by the conference Wednesday, something stood out. It showed Iowa playing Penn State during both seasons – 2018 in State College, Pa., 2019 in Iowa City.

To add to this, the Hawkeyes and Nittany Lions were already slated to play each other during both the 2016 and 2017 seasons, with 2016 marking when the Big Ten officially goes to a 9-game conference schedule.

This left me wondering if there were any other quirks that were similar. It was already established that Indiana and Purdue would continue meeting annually for the “Old Oaken Bucket” despite being in opposite divisions, but the pattern here became more glaring.

Starting in 2016 (and for now anyway, going through 2019), the following interdivisional match-ups are happening annually – Iowa vs. Penn State, Illinois vs. Rutgers, Minnesota vs. Maryland, Nebraska vs. Ohio State, Northwestern vs. Michigan State, Purdue vs. Indiana and Wisconsin vs. Michigan.

Now it’s worth mentioning that Purdue vs. Indiana is the only one of these match-ups also taking place in both 2014 and 2015 as well once Maryland and Rutgers are official members and the divisions have realigned. But for all the talk about that being the only protected rivalry, it appears that’s not the case here.

Big Ten commissioner Jim Delany said there would be more “parity-based” scheduling beginning with 2016 when the conference goes to 9-game schedules. But this goes above and beyond.

The problem here is this comes off as acknowledging there’s no parity right now, which isn’t a good image for a conference that prides itself on providing all its members equal revenue.

So where is it? Where exactly is the parity? Let’s look at (for example) Nebraska and Ohio State playing each other for (at least) four straight seasons. Yes, a game between the Cornhuskers and Buckeyes will attract more eyeballs to TV screens. But let’s say Nebraska has a drop-off by 2016 while Ohio State stays atop the league. Is that really being fair to the Cornhuskers to constantly be playing a team it doesn’t match up with in this hypothetical scenario? The only way “parity-based” scheduling works is if match-ups aren’t announced like this so far in advance.

“Parity-based” is more what the NFL does with scheduling, where two opponents remain TBD until the season ends, then the first place teams all play each other, then the second place teams all play each other, and so on for the following year. If there was a way to make it so the top teams in each division meet annually the following year – guaranteeing a rematch of the previous year’s Big Ten championship game – then great. This won’t happen in college football anytime soon though because so much goes into scheduling, especially with games so far in advance like this.

The other thing to consider is there are clear winners here with these schedules shaking out like they have. For instance, Michigan State athletics director Mark Hollis must love the fact that the Spartans have Northwestern on their schedule for four straight years.

This allows Michigan State to build its brand in the

Chicagoland area (a reason some Spartan fans were clamoring to be in the West and a reason why Michigan State wanted to share a division with Northwestern when Legends and Leaders were first formed). West teams like Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Purdue that thought it'd have an edge on Michigan State in building their brands across Chicagoland because they were all guaranteed trips to Evanston every other year no longer hold that advantage over Michigan State.

Then let's look at Wisconsin, who comes off another clear winner thanks in large part to its AD, Barry Alvarez. The Badgers get to play Michigan every year starting in 2016. If there ever was a "Big Four" inside the Big Ten, this is as close as one could get to publicly acknowledging that Wisconsin has taken Penn State's spot in that group.

Playing rivalry games every year, plus playing a program like Michigan every year? Yeah, this is very beneficial to Wisconsin and it's hard to see its brand diminishing on a national scale anytime soon because of this, especially if Michigan remains a marquee name in college football.

And while having to play Ohio State every year might not seem ideal to Nebraska fans, the Cornhuskers are also a winner with this scheduling and here's why – recruiting.

When Nebraska first joined the conference, the growing concern was whether it'd be able to change its recruiting philosophy and instead of focusing on Texas like it did when playing in the Big 12, be able to recruit Ohio more. Everyone in the Big Ten recruits Ohio, at least the schools who win on a consistent basis.

Whatever recruiting disadvantage Nebraska may have had before is gone when its coaching staff can go into a place like Ohio and sell high-school kids on the idea of playing the Buckeyes every season. The Cornhuskers are looking at two trips to the Horseshoe in 2016 and 2018. Meanwhile, there are other West

Division teams that could be looking at 7-year spans between trips to Columbus.

And let's say Nebraska does become the power-house it once was and Ohio State remains at the top like it is now. There's potential now for this to become what Nebraska vs. Oklahoma was to the Big 8 back in the 1970s.

Maybe there's some benefit for Penn State in playing Iowa every year. Maybe there's some benefit for Maryland in playing Minnesota every year. Maybe there's some benefit for Rutgers in playing Illinois every year. That's all hard to see right now though.

A lot can obviously happen between now and 2019. The Big Ten could expand yet again and all this conjecture about football schedules 5-6 years down the road is all for naught. But let's say for argument's sake the Big Ten stands pat on 14 teams. Whenever the 2020 and 2021 schedules get released, the odds of Iowa returning to Beaver Stadium in 2020 and Penn State returning to Kinnick Stadium in 2021 appear high because of the obvious pattern here with the league's scheduling.

It's not that there's anything wrong with this approach. After all, this is best way of ensuring there's an Old Oaken Bucket battle every year in either Bloomington or West Lafayette, Ind., without completely screwing over the other 12 Big Ten teams.

But the reality is these future schedules really look no different from what the Big Ten put out before with just 8-game slates. It's just that the current "rivalry" between Iowa and Purdue will now become a "rivalry" between Iowa and Penn State, starting in 2016.