

10/28/2013: State of the Big Ten, Volume 104 (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

HawkeyeDrive.com

With the calendar turning to November later this week, there's a question worth asking – what defines "strength" in the world of college basketball?

If strength is a matter of how many legitimate Final Four contenders sit atop a conference, then the Big Ten might not appear as strong entering 2013-14 like it was at this time last season. In fact, one could argue last season was as good as the Big Ten has ever looked in college basketball. There was nearly a four-way tie for first place at season's end, yet the team finishing fifth was the one who got hot in the NCAA tournament and nearly won the national championship as a No. 4 seed.

When the AP preseason poll gets released later this week, three Big Ten teams are safe bets to be ranked – Michigan State, Ohio State and Michigan. The Spartans return all but one player from a team that went to the Sweet 16 last year, while the Buckeyes came one win away from a second consecutive Final Four appearance last March and the Wolverines reached the national title game where they lost to Louisville. Ohio State and Michigan bring back enough to legitimately be viewed as top 10 teams like Michigan State will be.

There could be four, five or even six teams that appear in that initial top 25 later this week. This is because many regard teams like Wisconsin, Indiana and Iowa to all be NCAA tournament-caliber this season. But compared to last season, 4, 5 and 6 aren't going to appear as strong this year. Again, if strength is determined by what's at the top, the Big Ten isn't as good as it was last year and there might be a valid argument for the ACC being better.

But, if strength is determined by how good a conference is from top to bottom, then the Big Ten will be better this season. Both the middle and bottom of the league are stronger now as opposed to last year. Purdue might finish seventh again like it did a season ago, but will be a much improved seventh place team this year, one that could sneak its way into the NCAA tournament. Illinois might not be as good, but John Groce has proven himself already as a solid recruiter.

Teams like Minnesota and Northwestern who underwent coaching changes still have star players to center their teams around. The Golden Gophers bring back point guard Andre Hollins and the Wildcats will have the services of Drew Crawford after being injured and missing all of last season. In Chris Collins' system, he could become a more dynamic player than he already was.

Much like Crawford at Northwestern, Penn State will have Tim Frazier back in 2013-14. That alone makes the Nittany Lions better. Add in this being Patrick Chambers' third season at the helm, and Penn State's a team that could sneak up on other teams during league play. The same can also be said for Tim Miles and his Nebraska squad, a team opening Pinnacle Bank Arena next week following a season that saw the Cornhuskers beat Purdue in the first round of the Big Ten Tournament.

Indiana won the Big Ten with a 14-4 conference mark last season. This season, 12-6 might win the league because with the Big Ten's depth, upsets are bound to happen. Teams being

viewed at the bottom are going to shake the standings up winning a game or two they shouldn't have any business winning. To take it a step further, this is also shaping up to be a season where a team that finishes between that 5-8 range could put together a run during the Big Ten Tournament and play its way into the NCAA Tournament.

The national perception will primarily take into account the top of the conference, which as stated, isn't as strong as it was in 2012-13. The reality is there are going to be a handful of teams that can win anywhere between 7-11 games in conference play, which should make the match-ups more intriguing than they'll initially sound.