

# 11/4/2013: State of the Big Ten, Volume 105 (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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The Big Ten might still be No. 4 Ohio State's to lose, but the No. 18 Michigan State Spartans sent a loud message over the weekend to both the entire conference and the entire nation with their 29-6 drubbing of in-state rival Michigan.

Mathematically speaking, there are still three teams in the Legends Division that have a reasonable opportunity to win the division. But while both Minnesota and Nebraska may still mathematically be alive here, let's be realistic. Michigan State not playing Ohio State in the Big Ten Championship Game at this point would be a major shock.

And honestly, that match-up would be the best-case scenario for the Big Ten in terms of its perception. If the Spartans are 11-1 and reach that game by going 8-0 in Big Ten play, it would help give Ohio State something to boast about should the Buckeyes prevail in Indianapolis that night. But then again, it might also present enough of a challenge that maybe, just maybe, Michigan State pulls off the upset.

It's not too far-fetched, either. There's the creed in sports about how "defense wins championships" and the Spartans have as good a defense as there is in college football, period. Not just the Big Ten, but nationally.

Right now, Michigan State's defense gives up an average of 210.2 yards per game, the fewest of any team in the country. The next closest is Louisville giving up 244.5 yards per game. In terms of scoring defense, the Spartans give up an average of 11.6 points per game – third nationally behind Alabama and Louisville. But they've also played nine games while those other two teams have played eight.

No team has allowed fewer rushing yards than Michigan State and only three teams have given up fewer yards through the air. In terms of opponents' ground game production, it's almost non-existent. The most impressive aspect of the Spartans' 23-point victory over Michigan was that they held the Wolverines to -48 yards rushing. Yes, that's a minus sign in front of the 48. Which is absolutely absurd.

Since Mark Dantonio took over in 2007, dominance on the defensive side of the football has become the reputation in East Lansing. Most of the games Michigan State has lost in recent years have been a direct result of either being entirely outmatched (see the 2011 Capital One Bowl against Alabama) or the offense absolutely sputtering (see the one defeat this season at Notre Dame). The Spartans have always been elite defensively, which makes what they're doing this season even scarier.

Maybe this team has benefited from a weaker schedule than recent years past. One could argue last weekend's game against Michigan has been Michigan State's most impressive victory to date. But if the Spartans can get just enough from their offense, this defense has proven time and time again it can play with anybody and as a result, Michigan State's going to always find itself in a position to beat anyone it plays.

So yeah, the Spartans might not win the Big Ten. Heck, they could go 11-2 and possibly see a 10-2 Wisconsin get picked ahead of them for a BCS bowl like it was back in 2010 when there was a 3-way tie atop the Big Ten. But what's developing

at Michigan State right now is worth highlighting because at the very least, it doesn't make predictions such as Ohio State winning the Big Ten or Wisconsin going to a BCS bowl as an at-large complete certainties.