

# 11/18/2013: State of the Big Ten, Volume 107 (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 surprise isn't that Michigan State is ranked No. 1 in the country now after the Spartans beat Kentucky last week at the Champions Classic in Chicago. Once that happened, it was practically a formality Michigan State would be atop both the AP and Coaches Polls released Monday (although Columbia gave the Spartans quite a scare the other night inside the Breslin Center).

Here's what the surprise is: Monday's releases of both rankings feature Michigan State as the nation's No. 1 college basketball team for the first time since the 2000-2001 season. Yes, it had been that long since Tom Izzo's program stood atop the college basketball world.

It feels shocking because (outside of 2010-11, anyway) Michigan State has always been consistently among the Big Ten's elite under Izzo's watch. Since winning the national championship back in 2000, the Spartans have been to four Final Fours (2001, 2005, 2009, 2010) and were even a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament two seasons ago after winning both the Big Ten regular season and tournament crowns. When one thinks of Big Ten basketball in this millennium, Michigan State's probably the first team that comes to mind.

But here's where what's taking place right now in East Lansing deserves the merit its currently receiving: Only one of those aforementioned Final Four trips since that 2000 national title featured the Spartans as a No. 1 seed (2001, the last time it was ranked No. 1). Michigan State has always been viewed as one of those teams that has to be accounted for come March, but it hasn't always been viewed among the country's elite teams (2011-12 perhaps being the exception despite losing to Louisville in the Sweet 16).

Coming into this season, it was no secret the Spartans were and still are the Big Ten's best team. They only lost one starter from last year's squad and the name of that player wasn't Gary Harris or Adreian Payne. Not only is that the league's best 1-2 punch this season, but those two guys just might be the Big Ten's best players this season, period.

Michigan State might not have the stud freshmen like those other three teams that were with it in Chicago last week have (by the way, no one would objectively speaking be opposed to that foursome making up this year's Final Four, right?). But what the Spartans do possess is the experience from having gone through one of the Big Ten's best seasons ever just a year ago. The rest of the league's contenders might not be as strong this year, but that's absolutely not the case here with Michigan State.

Throw in that aforementioned success in March throughout Izzo's tenure in East Lansing, and this is why the Spartans belong in the same conversation (and rightfully so) with teams like Kentucky, Kansas and Duke this season.

Maybe Michigan State isn't really the nation's best team at this time, even if its ranking suggest it is. But make no mistake, this is a squad that will remain in the conversation all season long. The Spartans look the part of a team capable of winning the Big Ten, being a No. 1 seed in the NCAA tourney and keeping that factoid about every single one of Izzo's

four-year players experiencing a Final Four during his time coaching Michigan State.

In a season where college basketball is viewed nationally as the strongest it has ever been, whoever wins the national title will be earning every bit of it. If this year's version does reach the Final Four and does so as the No. 1 seed it will very likely be come March, it's going to be in the discussion of Izzo's best teams all-time. If the Spartans cut down the nets in Arlington, Texas, on April 7, it might even end up being viewed better than that 1999-2000 squad.

That might end up being the biggest surprise of all.