

# 12/16/2013: State of the Big Ten, Volume 111 (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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For the second straight week, three Big Ten teams are featured in the top five of the AP's top 25 poll. The order remains the same as it was a week ago with undefeated Ohio State (10-0) ranked third, undefeated Wisconsin (12-0) ranked fourth and Michigan State remaining fifth.

One of these three teams warrants some serious discussion right now, and that's the Badgers. Maybe they wind up having another early exit from the NCAA Tournament like last season or just don't wind up going as far as either the Buckeyes or Spartans in the tourney come March. Heck, Wisconsin might not even win the Big Ten this season.

But the 12-0 is hard to ignore right now, especially when the Badgers are off to their best start to a season in nearly 100 years.

Consistency is something that has become synonymous with Wisconsin basketball during this millennium. Every full season that Bo Ryan has been at the helm as head coach, the Badgers have finished no lower than fourth in the Big Ten standings. This is a streak that goes back to the 2001-02 season. This is a program that has consistently reached the NCAA Tournament on a regular basis under Ryan. Sure, there haven't been any Final

Fours since 2000 (before Ryan took over), but Wisconsin has been a team one comes to expect being in the conversation every March to at least make a run in the tournament.

And now here are the Badgers off to their best start ever under Ryan. Right now, Wisconsin is ranked fourth in the country and rightfully so. The Badgers have already beaten teams such as St. John's, Florida, Virginia and Marquette. Even mid-majors like UW-Green Bay have proven to be decent victories.

Wisconsin has the best résumé currently of any Big Ten team and quite possibly any team in the country at this point. But here's what will play to the Badgers' advantage going forward – the Big Ten schedule.

Those other two teams currently in the top five along with Wisconsin – Ohio State and Michigan State – both play the Badgers just once and both have to play them at the Kohl Center in Madison. In fact, one could make the case that Wisconsin's toughest road game might not be until Feb. 22 when it plays an Iowa squad currently ranked 25th nationally.

Now the Badgers might not be a team worth banking on to win three straight games in the Big Ten Tournament next March, but they have enough veteran players in place to make a run. This is a team that is slowly becoming the favorite to win the Big Ten, even if it isn't necessarily the most talented or complete team in the conference, mainly because of having such an advantageous schedule.

In order to win the Big Ten or win the national title, guard play is crucial. Wisconsin has plenty of reliable guards in its backcourt with guys like Ben Brust, Traevon Jackson and Josh Gasser and forward Sam Dekker is in the mold of a wing player. The question surrounding this team coming into the season was inside and to this point, Frank Kaminsky has impressed.

Again, this season could still end on a bitter note for the Badgers. But what they've already accomplished thus far is not only impressive, but also shows what Wisconsin remains capable of because the ingredients are in place for this to be a special season for Ryan and his team.