

# 12/23/2013: State of the Big Ten, Volume 112 (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*

Bowl season has officially begun and once again, the Big Ten has an opportunity to silence its critics.

If it seems like an annual issue, it kind of is. Aside from 2009 when each of the league's top four teams all won bowl games (including two BCS games), the Big Ten has had a horrific bowl record and that ends up being some sort of referendum on the conference as a whole.

Last year, in what was probably the weakest Big Ten in years, there were two bowl victories out of seven games. This year, the conference was better and it's not all that far-fetched to think a winning record can come out of the seven bowl games being played between Dec. 27-Jan. 3. But it's time to deliver.

The buck obviously starts and ends with No. 4 Michigan State and No. 7 Ohio State. Both are playing in BCS games. For the Spartans, they're playing in their first Rose Bowl in 26 years. The Buckeyes on the other hand have to attempt bouncing back from another failure on a big stage earlier this month in Indianapolis.

But that doesn't take the pressure off the other five Big Ten teams playing in bowls, either. Obviously, there are three

match-ups between the Big Ten and SEC. At least two of the three among No. 19 Wisconsin, Iowa and Nebraska probably need to come away with victories despite none of them being favored. The Badgers' date with No. 8 South Carolina in the Capital One Bowl is practically a toss-up, Iowa has a decent shot against a No. 14 LSU squad playing with its second-string quarterback and Nebraska should be familiar with what No. 23 Georgia will want to do given how the Cornhuskers and Bulldogs just met in a bowl last year. It's not the be all, end all, but a strong showing against what still gets considered the nation's best conference when it comes to college football would be a start.

Then there's both Michigan and Minnesota. Both have different circumstances, but similar pressures. In the Golden Gophers' case, they're back in the Texas Bowl once again, but are probably the league's best bet to win a bowl this season facing what appears to be an inferior opponent in Syracuse. For Minnesota, this is an opportunity to have a 9-4 season potentially springboard into bigger things with the Big Ten's divisions realigning geographically next year.

The realignment is also why Saturday's Buffalo Wild Wings Bowl is big for Michigan. If the Wolverines can build off their showing against Ohio State and beat Kansas State this weekend, again, there's some momentum that can be carried over into next season. Lose though, and the questions about whether this team can beat either Ohio State or Michigan State on the road next season will just be asked even more than anticipated.

Bowl season is always a crucial time for any conference, the Big Ten included. But it seems like this year, the spotlight is even bigger. Another bad showing over the next week-and-a-half and the ridicule will only get stronger as the conference expands to 14. A strong showing however – not 7-0 necessarily, but say, 4-3 or better – and the talk about how bad the Big Ten is will dwindle at least somewhat.