

# 12/30/2013: State of the Big Ten, Volume 113 (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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It was never a secret that Bill O'Brien was viewed as a football head coach who would one day have the opportunity to take over a NFL team. After all, his time spent as one of Bill Belichick's assistants with the New England Patriots is what ultimately landed him the opportunity to take over Penn State.

Speculation about O'Brien leaving Penn State now for the NFL has heated up to the point where it's appearing to be a very real possibility that he leaves State College two years into a complete overhaul. Ultimately, it's his decision whether to leave and coach a team like the Houston Texans or stay around at Penn State and if he does depart, no one could fault him.

There's so much of an unknown with Nittany Lion football right now and if O'Brien does bolt to Houston or any other NFL city where there's a vacancy, that unknown only becomes more glaring. Yes, the sanctions that were levied against Penn State by the NCAA in 2012 have been reduced. But the stability that O'Brien presents is something that would be hard to replace.

Here's the other major question if Penn State has another coaching vacancy – Who would even want that job? Who would it pursue? There are already reports that it would strongly

consider Greg Schiano, who just got fired by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers on Monday. Schiano previously coached at Rutgers and before that spent time as an assistant on Joe Paterno's staff at Penn State.

But there's the conundrum. When O'Brien was hired, it came off as a concerted effort to bring in someone who had no prior association to Paterno or anyone else that was around Penn State when atrocities were being committed. Maybe someone like Schiano or other coaches out there with ties to Paterno may prove to be the best fit should O'Brien leave, but it would also draw a lot of criticism about how much Penn State has really disassociated itself from what all took place on Paterno's watch.

There's nothing that can be guaranteed. Even with a quarterback like Christian Hackenberg in place for at least two (if not three) years, having to bring in an entirely new coaching staff still leaves Penn State in a quandary because stability isn't a guarantee.

If a successor to O'Brien comes in and the Nittany Lions continue to do well like they have the last two seasons, the NFL questions could always return. If that same potential successor doesn't have similar success, Penn State won't be in any type of position anytime soon to just dismiss a coach because of wins and losses.

No matter how this plays out, this is going to be interesting to watch unfold because it will have ramifications on the entire conference. Maybe not in terms of who wins the Big Ten every year, but in terms of how coaches at other schools get measured by their ADs. That's where the unknown becomes a factor beyond Penn State.