

1/20/2014: State of the Big Ten, Volume 116 (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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As far as the conference's state in basketball is concerned, the Big Ten currently features a trio of top 10 teams, proving the league is still among the nation's best in the sport.

Two of those teams are expected. Michigan State is currently third as it sits alone in first place at 6-0 in Big Ten play despite being enamored with injuries. Wisconsin's start to the season enabled the Badgers to reach this point and they're now ranked ninth even after losing a pair of conference games last week to Indiana and Michigan (now ranked 21st).

Then there's Iowa. Yes, Iowa. The Hawkeyes moved up four spots in this week's AP poll, six spots in this week's Coaches poll and find themselves ranked 10th in both polls. As far as the AP poll is concerned, this is Iowa's first top 10 ranking since the 2001-02 season.

That season ended with incredible disappointment for Hawkeye fans, as Iowa went from being ninth nationally when the calendar turned to 2002 to completely missing the NCAA Tournament altogether and unceremoniously being bounced from the first round of the NIT by LSU.

This is a much different circumstance. In fact, it's nothing

short of remarkable how it only took Fran McCaffery four years to change the culture of Iowa basketball. When he took over in 2010, the Hawkeyes were in the Big Ten cellar. Now, they've become the league's cream of the crop.

At 15-3, Iowa is off to its best start since 1997-98, another season that ended with the disappointment of winding up in the NIT and losing in the first round to Georgia. It would take a monumental collapse by the Hawkeyes to be mentioned any further in the same sentence as either the 1997-98 or 2001-02 squads.

Right now, this is the story of the Big Ten season. It's not because Iowa has come out of nowhere to do what it's doing, but rather because the expectation of taking that next step as a program (at least to this point of the season) has been met. Sure, the Hawkeyes won a couple of Big Ten Tournaments under former head coach Steve Alford. But again, this has a different feel to it entirely.

The odds of the Hawkeyes actually winning the Big Ten regular season crown remain slim. Unbalanced scheduling has more to do with that than anything else, really. Iowa plays three of its next four on the road (starting with that Michigan squad that just re-emerged in the AP top 25 on Monday). The Hawkeyes play Michigan twice, Michigan State twice, Illinois twice, at Indiana, at Minnesota and rematches at Carver-Hawkeye Arena against No. 17 Ohio State and Wisconsin.

In other words, they have a brutal slate still ahead of them. If Iowa somehow is able to win this league, it will have earned every bit of it facing this gauntlet.

That being said, there might not be a scarier team at the Big Ten Tournament come March. Michigan State won it two years ago, but teams like the Spartans that are regularly accustomed to playing in NCAA Tournaments don't put as much into winning conference tourneys. Conversely, a team like Iowa will go into

that event as motivated as it has ever been. Then add in the type of depth McCaffery will have to work with playing three games in three days (something the Hawkeyes already did this season at the Battle 4 Atlantis) and the ingredients are there.

A lot still has to be determined, but if the season ended today, McCaffery would be the Big Ten's Coach of the Year (either him or John Beilein). Devyn Marble has arguably been the best player in the conference this season as well and would at the very least be first-team all-Big Ten.

As challenging as these next few weeks might be, there's a lot to like about this team and what's it capable of going forward.