

1/27/2014: State of the Big Ten, Volume 117 (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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Four weeks into league play, no team has impressed more than the Michigan Wolverines.

After beating in-state rival Michigan State 80-75 over the weekend, Michigan now remains the Big Ten's only unbeaten team in league play at 7-0. By emerging victorious over the then-No. 3 Spartans in East Lansing, the Wolverines became the first team since the 1986-87 Iowa Hawkeyes to win three consecutive games against top 10 teams.

As a result of that, Michigan saw itself skyrocket from 21st in last week's AP poll to 10th in the latest poll released Monday. To put this into perspective, the Wolverines weren't even ranked nine days ago when they left Wisconsin a 77-70 winner over the then-No. 3 Badgers.

But it's not just the fact that Michigan has played like it has the last four weeks. Looking at the Big Ten race long-term, no team has itself better situated for the home stretch than the Wolverines do. They already have road wins over Minnesota, No. 24 Wisconsin and No. 7 Michigan State, plus they recently won a home game over Iowa, who is currently ranked 15th. Michigan might not play a tougher road game the rest of the season than the one it just played at Michigan

State and that's something that should give it confidence going forward.

Other than a two-game stretch where they play Iowa again and then Ohio State on the road back-to-back, the Wolverines' remaining schedule is predominantly featured with games inside Crisler Center. Having won all the road games they've already won is something that will prove beneficial when the season is complete.

There are two other things to talk about here when it comes to Michigan. First is the head coaching job done by John Beilein. It's no secret he's a good coach and it never was a secret how good he is. After all, this is the same program he just coached to an appearance in the national championship game nine months ago.

But when variables such as losing both Trey Burke and Tim Hardaway, Jr., early to the NBA and losing sophomore center Mitch McGary to a season-ending back injury are factored in, it makes the job Beilein is doing this season remarkable. This is a team that lost four games (three of which came to really good teams) during non-conference play and looked like nothing more than a middle-of-the-pack Big Ten team when the month began.

Then there's the player who did return, Nik Stauskas. As long as the Wolverines continue this pace and find themselves winning the Big Ten regular season crown, Stauskas is the Big Ten Player of the Year and by a significant margin. He's the Big Ten's best player on the Big Ten's best team.

When his team has needed him in crunch time the last few weeks, the Canadian sophomore has delivered for Michigan. That leadership role Burke had at this time last year has carried over to Stauskas, who has proven this year to be more than just a 3-point threat.

Whether or not Michigan is capable enough of returning to the

Final Four for the second straight season remains to be seen, but one thing has become clear now. The Wolverines just might be the team to beat now in the Big Ten. They might not be the best team, but they've jockeyed themselves into a better position now than anyone else in the league can claim to have and that's something that will be significant in the final days and weeks before the Big Ten Tournament.