

3/31/2014: State of the Big Ten, Volume 126 (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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With Wisconsin reaching its first Final Four since 2000, this seems like a week that should be devoted to discussing the job Bo Ryan has done with the Badgers this year and the bright future that appears to be lying ahead for them. But thanks to a ruling that occurred last week in Chicago, it isn't. (*Should Wisconsin beat Kentucky and reach the national title game, next week's space will be entirely devoted to Ryan's squad.*)

Earlier in the year, former Northwestern quarterback Kain Colter became the leader of a group seeking to have unionization brought into college football. Last week, the National Labor Relations Board in Chicago ruled in favor of Colter and his party, saying that Northwestern football players are university employees and therefore have the legal grounds to unionize. Naturally, Northwestern University is appealing this and the NCAA has already gone on record as saying it doesn't agree with the ruling, so no actual resolution will come anytime soon.

A lot has been documented in recent days about the effect this will have on college sports as a whole in the future. Right now though, an interesting perspective to examine is the effect this could have on Northwestern football in the short term.

Because he's no longer a member of the team, Colter has the ability to speak out on this issue publicly as much as he wants and the longer this process continues, the more he'll speak. From a pure football perspective, coaches don't like having to deal with outside distractions to whatever they're trying to accomplish and Northwestern head coach Pat Fitzgerald is no exception to this. As much as he'd like to brush this aside and solely concentrate on his current team, Fitzgerald won't be able to this season.

Northwestern might be able to place stipulations on what gets asked of any of its student-athletes (not just football players) regarding this. It won't be able to shield Fitzgerald though from any media in Chicago or nationally.

In May, the Big Ten will conduct its annual spring meetings in Chicago and this is a year where football coaches will be present at those meetings. Fitzgerald, Northwestern athletics director Jim Phillips and Big Ten commissioner Jim Delany will be fielding questions about this then and it will probably be the biggest topic of discussion that week. Same thing goes for when the Big Ten conducts its annual Football Media Days in late July, which are also in Chicago. This isn't going to get ignored.

With all of this being said, one thing that will be interesting to watch this fall is what happens on the gridiron. Keep in mind, the Wildcats are coming off a massively disappointing season that began with promise. A team that won 10 games (including the Gator Bowl) in 2012 couldn't even get bowl-eligible in 2013.

One thing coaches and players say all the time is how improvements are made in the offseason. This is going to be a different offseason in Evanston. It's one thing for players to improve physically, but how much of a mental drain is this going to have on everyone inside that football program between now and August? The answer to this question won't be verbally

revealed during the season, even if it seems obvious one way or the other. What does seem obvious is that no matter what ends up happening long term, these next few months might prove to be the most challenging of Fitzgerald's coaching career.

How Northwestern responds both on and off the field to everything will significantly shape the type of future it has, both as a football program and as a university.