

COMMENTARY: Iowa's next B1G chapter (premium)

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On Tuesday, the next chapter in a dramatic change of landscape in college sports commences. The Big Ten, which expanded to 12 institutions in 2011, will increase by two more when Maryland and Rutgers become official conference members.

From the Big Ten's perspective, these additions mark a new beginning of sorts. Anyone associated with the conference's long-standing members will have to re-evaluate their school's ideals. By expanding to the Eastern shore, the Big Ten will now have more of a national brand than ever before and this national branding goes beyond football.

But let's talk football since that's the biggest moneymaker at most of the Big Ten's institutions. Individually speaking, neither Maryland nor Rutgers will directly impact Iowa football. Neither team's in the Hawkeyes' division and once the league schedule increases to nine games in 2016, both teams will scarcely appear on Iowa's schedule. If anything, the impact these two additions have on Iowa has more to do with the entire conference realigning its divisions by geography and allowing the Hawkeyes to play more of their natural conference rivals on an annual basis. On that front, it's a good thing.

But one could make the argument the arrivals of Maryland and Rutgers will indirectly have an enormous impact on Iowa going forward. Again, the Big Ten is building more of a national brand, which means there's going to be more attention placed on schools like Iowa than ever before.

Some (not all) of what would be considered “success” when it comes to Iowa football is no longer going to be the case. Consistently being an 8-win team that annually goes to bowl games and has an enormous fan following to such games isn’t going to matter like it once did. It might still matter to people in Iowa and many who are and have always been Hawkeye fans. But it’s not going to tip the scale nationally.

Here’s the other (perhaps greater) issue Iowa and its conference brethren will face – the role a 4-team college football playoff will now have on society. Just going to bowl games won’t matter like it did before. Iowa’s not only competing against other Big Ten teams. It’s essentially competing against everybody from all of the major conferences as well.

Consider this scenario: Iowa wins the Big Ten in 2014, but isn’t part of the 4-team playoff because the teams that win the ACC, Big 12, Pac-12 and SEC all finish higher in the polls and get selected instead. Now throw in that the Rose Bowl is one of the semifinal games this season and the Big Ten champion gets sent instead to the Cotton, Fiesta or Peach Bowls. Then let’s say over the following 11 years (there’s a 12-year agreement with the current format), Iowa has mostly winning seasons, but not a single conference championship or playoff appearance to its name.

If you’re an Iowa fan, how would you feel knowing that in one of the few instances where everything could fall into place for the Hawkeyes to win the Big Ten, they still get considered an afterthought nationally because they weren’t the national champion or even one of the other three playoff participants?

Sure, local interest would be sky-high. That will never change regardless of year. But let’s tie this back to the Big Ten wanting to become more national. If you’re not part of the biggest stage, then why is anyone in a place like New York City or Washington, D.C. suddenly going to care?

This already happens in basketball, which is why I don't foresee adaptation being as big a concern there. The NCAA Tournament already exists. In Iowa, last year's Hawkeyes are known for reaching the tourney for the first time in eight years. Outside of Iowa, the Hawkeyes are known for losing "the play-in game." Unless the Hawkeyes start frequently appearing in more tournaments and put themselves in position to reach bigger stages like the Sweet 16, Elite Eight or even the Final Four, that stigma's going to stick. If this seems obvious, that's because it is and it will be in football, too.

As crazy as this might sound, the best thing that could happen to Iowa football is if sometime in the next 10 years, the NCAA allows teams to play 13 regular season games excluding conference championships, bowls and playoff games. Until that day comes, the Hawkeyes might be hamstrung if strength of non-conference schedule is going to be any type of factor in playoff team selection.

Iowa wants seven games at Kinnick Stadium every season and wants to play Iowa State every season. When the Big Ten goes to nine league games in 2016, the Hawkeyes are going to basically be left with two non-conference games to fill and they're going to require both of them be played at Kinnick Stadium. No home-and-homes with a team like Pitt or playing a game at Soldier Field against Northern Illinois like in 2012 would be happening.

Unless the Big Ten bulks up, future schedules won't be getting stronger. Even if the Big Ten bulks up, it appears inevitable that all five major conferences will start playing nine league games. In other words, if schedules remain at 12 games for the foreseeable future, Iowa may have to make some sacrifices down the road if it wants to be in a realistic position to reap the reward of being part of a national brand such as the Big Ten.

Sure, Iowa might not be crossing paths in a Big Ten Championship Game with either Maryland or Rutgers anytime

soon. But between those two programs now joining the Big Ten and how the 4-team college football playoff is going to determine success both on the field and off the field with name recognition and national appeal, it's safe to say the Hawkeyes are at a crossroads and how they handle this now will dramatically effect their future long term.