

2014 Big Ten Media Days: Takeaways

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CHICAGO, Ill. – After compiling about a month's worth of information regarding Big Ten football the last two days, there was plenty to take away from the 2014 edition of Big Ten Media Days. Below is a list of 10 observations I made from hearing coaches and players from all 14 teams speak over the past 48 hours.

1. Stronger league

Regarding the state of this conference as a whole, I would say this is easily the strongest the Big Ten has been since 2010 when it featured four teams coming off bowl victories, including two BCS games. Michigan State winning the Rose Bowl last season certainly helps that cause. So does Ohio State quarterback Braxton Miller returning for his senior year.

But I also believe part of it has to do with coaching. Collectively speaking, I think this is the strongest group of coaches this league has had in a while. Little needs to be said about coaches like Urban Meyer and Mark Dantonio because their recent accomplishments speak for themselves. But in addition to those guys, there's Kirk Ferentz coming off a season where his team doubled its victory total from the year before. There's Jerry Kill, who just had an eight-win season at Minnesota and has taken the Golden Gophers to two straight bowls. While Northwestern had an unexpected drop-off last year and missed bowling altogether, Pat Fitzgerald is still his usual self and the Wildcats are capable of a bounce-back year.

Coaching in this league also appears stable right now with

only one coaching change taking place and that was the result of someone leaving for the NFL. If the league can get through the next calendar year with little to no change occurring in the coaching ranks, it will only get stronger going forward.

2. All about the Playoff

This point couldn't be hammered home more. Upon arriving at the ballroom to pick up my media credential Monday morning, one of the first things I noticed at the table with all the media guides was a pile of black notepads with the "College Football Playoff" logo featured, along with packets of information pertaining to the new four-team playoff that's starting this season.

Consider this: If there was never a BCS and this four-team playoff was formed in 1998 when the BCS began, the Big Ten would have had 11 appearances between five teams (Nebraska's two appearances would have come when it was still in the Big 12) over the last 16 seasons.

For perspective, last year's Michigan State squad – which won all nine of its Big Ten games by double digits – would have been the No. 4 seed, barely making the field. It also would have been the first Big Ten team in six years to reach the Playoff. The 2002 Iowa Hawkeyes, a team that went 8-0 in the conference and won a share of the Big Ten title that season with national champion Ohio State, wouldn't have made the Playoff because they were fifth in the final BCS Standings. The best Iowa team in the last quarter-century wouldn't have even made the Playoff. Let that sink in.

With this new era of college football taking place, this is going to be a key time for the Big Ten to improve its perception. It's not a completely clean slate, but it's as close to one as it's going to get. The conference is becoming more national than ever before because the sport is more national than ever before. Now is a prime opportunity for the

Big Ten to gain the most national respect it has had since 2006.

3. No roses for Big Ten champion?

This season and every three years going forward, the Rose Bowl will be one of the two national semifinals played as part of this four-team playoff. It might not seem like a big deal, but envision the following scenario: An “under-the-radar” team exceeds expectations to the point that it not only wins its division, but surprises the nation by winning the Big Ten Championship Game.

But then the favorites from the other four major conferences – all of whom are ranked ahead of said Big Ten team (or just ranked, period) – meet expectations and are selected for the Playoff and the Big Ten is left hanging. Not only is the Big Ten not involved in the four-team playoff, but it’s also not sending its conference champion to the Rose Bowl, so this under-the-radar team has a once in a decade kind of season, but doesn’t get to play in Pasadena and might not again for the foreseeable future.

Another thing to keep in mind is this, and this comes from Michael Kelly, who is the Chief Operating Officer of the College Football Playoff – if the top seed can be placed closer to home, it will be unless the No. 4 seed gets more of a home-field advantage. The other semifinal is the Sugar Bowl and if the Big Ten champion does get the No. 1 seed in the Playoff, all 14 campuses are closer to New Orleans than Pasadena.

Simply put, the only way a Big Ten team is playing in Pasadena on New Year’s Day is if it’s in the Playoff and even that only has a 50 percent chance of happening. Keep this in mind as the season progresses.

4. Bowl selection order

While we're discussing bowls, let's get into the new bowl selection process. It's pretty much done by the conference now, so making projections will be a lot more challenging than before.

When I spoke to Kelly about this Tuesday, he said once the Playoff is formed, the next objective for the selection committee is figuring out the other tie-ins for the remaining four games, then assembling match-ups from there. The Big Ten has a tie-in with the Orange Bowl, but only a non-champion would be considered for that. In other words, if the Big Ten champion isn't part of the four-team playoff, Kelly said that team would play in one of these three games instead – the Cotton Bowl (New Year's Day in Arlington, Texas), the Peach Bowl (New Year's Eve in Atlanta, Ga.) or the Fiesta Bowl (New Year's Eve in Glendale, Ariz.).

Another thing to keep in mind: Any year where the Orange Bowl isn't part of the Playoff and takes a Big Ten at-large (which it has to do at least three times within the next 12 years as part of the contract in place), the Big Ten will not participate in the Capital One Bowl. That spot would be taken by the ACC instead.

There's also no limit on the number of teams a single conference can have in the six bowl games of importance. Kelly showed me an example of what would have happened if a playoff existed in 2006. Ohio State and Michigan both would have made the Playoff and Wisconsin (who went 11-1 that regular season and won the Capital One Bowl), would have been an at-large. If you recall, the Badgers were not allowed in a BCS bowl that season because the Big Ten already had two representatives in BCS games with the Buckeyes and Wolverines.

Once everything is settled on the big bowls and the Capital One Bowl, the order then goes Outback, Holiday, TaxSlayer or Music City (each of these will have a Big Ten team thrice over the next six years), San Francisco and Pinstripe. After that

tier is established, the new Detroit Lions Bowl picks and then the last spot is on a bi-annual rotation between the Heart of Dallas Bowl (which gets to pick a Big Ten team this season) and Armed Forces Bowl.

5. Early stages for Wisconsin & Michigan State

Right now, Ohio State is probably the one Big Ten team currently in the best spot to reach the four-team playoff because it will probably be the highest-ranked Big Ten team preseason and the likelihood of it still being undefeated when entering its Nov. 8 contest at Michigan State is strong. That being said, the first two weeks of the college football season are huge for this conference.

On Aug. 30, Wisconsin will be playing LSU down at NRG Stadium in Houston, Texas. It's part of a two-game deal that includes the two teams meeting again in 2016 at Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wis. This is a huge game for the Big Ten, and not just because it's against the SEC. The Badgers are the Big Ten media's favorite to win the West Division. If Wisconsin manages to somehow win this game, not only does it become a clear favorite to win the West, but it also becomes part of the Playoff conversation. After that LSU game (win or lose), the Badgers will likely be favored in each of their next nine contests leading up to Nov. 22 when they play at Iowa. In addition, Wisconsin has a running back in Melvin Gordon that just might stay in the Heisman Trophy conversation all season long if the Badgers managed to beat LSU and he has a strong showing.

"I love challenging myself and I love competing," Gordon said. "What better way to compete than with one of the best teams in the nation."

Then comes the following week when Michigan State, the league's defending champion, plays at Oregon, a team being picked to win the Pac-12 this year. The Spartans are good

enough to win this conference again in 2014 and if they somehow manage to escape Autzen Stadium with a victory (this isn't far-fetched if you've watch Stanford's games against Oregon the last two years), there's a very good chance they're still undefeated when Ohio State visits East Lansing on Nov. 8 in a prime time game that will likely decide the East Division.

On Monday, Dantonio said this game at Oregon could prove beneficial to his program, even if the Spartans lost. Shilique Calhoun took it a step further Tuesday when he mentioned how losing at Notre Dame – the only game Michigan State lost all season – factored in to the Spartans not playing for a national title last January.

"You have to win each and every game," Calhoun said. "Even early on with the games that are not in your conference, those are games you need to win. It shows a bigger emphasis of how it can hurt you down the road."

For two programs that have represented the Big Ten in each of the last four Rose Bowls, these are marquee games that could potentially keep them in the scope of the national landscape for years to come.

6. Additions of Maryland & Rutgers

The biggest change of all this year is the league expanding to 14 teams, as Maryland and Rutgers both became official members earlier this month. While it's still taking some getting used to for fans and media alike seeing these two schools in the Big Ten, the one positive everyone can agree on is how their additions prompted the conference to realign divisions by geography, which is honestly how it should have been done in the first place.

Rutgers head coach Kyle Flood said, "It felt right," to see the Scarlet Knights in the Big Ten. Maryland head coach Randy Edsall said his school fits what the conference is all about.

Both of these sentiments are up for debate and while the Big Ten is doing everything it can to make these schools feel welcome, the reality is neither is receiving the same amount of hospitality Nebraska got when it joined in 2011.

Recruiting-wise, I don't see a whole lot changing. Some schools in the West might commit more to recruiting the East Coast, but the philosophies both Edsall and Flood have had since taking over their respective programs aren't changing. They're still going to recruit the same areas they've recruited before.

On the field, I think the transition will be easier for Maryland in the short term. The Terrapins have enough talent on both sides of the football to get to six wins, even with the gauntlet of a Big Ten schedule they were given. Rutgers doesn't have the same stability at key positions, one of them being quarterback, that Maryland does. It also has to play Ohio State, Nebraska and Michigan State all away from High Point Solutions Stadium.

7. A boisterous Franklin

I'll say this for James Franklin after hearing him speak in person for the first time Monday – the guy is quite the salesman. The first-year Penn State head coach confidently took to the podium when it was his turn to talk and his bravado was very reminiscent of Bret Bielema when he coached at Wisconsin.

While I doubt Franklin has the same sort of immediate success at Penn State that Bielema had at Wisconsin, I do have a feeling Franklin becomes the coach that ruffles the most feathers among his Big Ten coaching peers. Heck, he's already doing just that with both of the league's newcomers and if there isn't something there between him and Meyer, it's only a matter of time.

I've seen some coaches come off boisterous, yet fail to

produce, and that failure to produce became immediately evident. I don't get the failing to produce vibe with Franklin. Penn State linebacker Mike Hull mentioned how he's nothing like any of the previous three coaches he played for (this includes former interim coach Tom Bradley in 2011), yet his way of operating has completely rubbed off on him and his teammates.

"Whenever you see someone that's that passionate and is always willing to put it all out on the line every single day, it just brings everyone else's energy and mood up no matter what," Hull said.

This was a bold hire for Penn State to make and it will be interesting to watch how his tenure in Happy Valley unfolds.

8. Northwestern/unionization

Fitzgerald was the first head coach to speak Monday and as expected, one of the most heated topics to come up while he was at the podium had to do with unionization in college football. His former quarterback Kain Colter was at the forefront of this issue and while it may not have been a complete distraction for his current players, the frustration Fitzgerald had talking about it was obvious.

He made an interesting comment though about how he felt his team became united because of this, perhaps more united than any team he has coached at Northwestern. Those sentiments were also felt by safety Ibraheim Campbell when he was asked about it Tuesday morning. Campbell mentioned how he noticed guys who wouldn't normally speak up felt comfortable voicing their opinions on the matter.

"It gave you an idea of how much people care about this school and this University and this team that we're part," Campbell said. "That trust and that camaraderie that we were kind of able to develop through that, it was really unexpected and nobody really knew what would come of it. It's something that

kind of just happened and I think it has been great.”

I think a lot will be revealed early on about Northwestern as far as how together this team actually is. If there’s still a divide, it will show. If this team is as united as Fitzgerald and Campbell both claim, it will show.

9. The hot seat

Right now, a case could be made that as many as three different Big Ten coaches are on the hot seat in terms of their job status. Those three guys are Illinois’ Tim Beckman, Michigan’s Brady Hoke and Nebraska’s Bo Pelini. However, I was left with the impression Monday that all three will stick around barring complete disasters this fall.

Let’s start with Beckman, who is entering his third season at Illinois. His first season in 2012 was a disaster as the Fighting Illini went 2-10. Last year, Illinois only won four games but also started showing strides of progress. Now the Fighting Illini might not have enough to reach six wins and become bowl-eligible (they’ll need to pull off a few upsets to make it happen), but they’re not as far off as some might say they are. Beckman looked calmer, more confident on Monday than he did each of the last two seasons. He also wasn’t nearly as demonstrative when speaking. If it’s not this year that Illinois reaches bowl eligibility, then I wouldn’t be surprised if it happens for him and his program in 2015.

Speaking of being calmer, that’s the side of Pelini that everyone saw in Chicago on Monday. When he was asked about his cat – which became famous when Pelini brought it out on the field during Nebraska’s spring game last April – he gave a joking, yet sincere reply. He also spoke about how he’s making more of an effort to show a side of him that’s far from what most of us see when he’s on the sidelines coaching. Pelini has a lot to feel good about and I imagine that includes his job security.

As for Hoke, my honest belief is Michigan fans shouldn't make any sort of final decisions on him based on this upcoming season. The Wolverines have to play Notre Dame, Michigan State and Ohio State all away from the Big House this fall and the offense is going to continue to have issues to the point that expecting Michigan to win any of these three games right now is unrealistic. However, Hoke is going to have a really good defense this season (not Michigan State good, but good) and as far as the future is concerned, I think there's a huge window of opportunity for Michigan if it stays committed to him.

10. What would be my preseason ballot

As I do every year when I write this, I put together what would've been my preseason Big Ten ballot had the conference continued providing the media with those as it once did once upon a time. Here's what my list would be for division winners and preseason picks for Big Ten Offensive and Defensive Players of the Year:

- WEST DIVISION – Wisconsin
- EAST DIVISION – Michigan State
- OFFENSIVE PLAYER – Melvin Gordon, RB, Wisconsin
- DEFENSIVE PLAYER – Randy Gregory, DE, Nebraska