

9/4/2012: Kirk Ferentz teleconference transcript (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

Below is a written transcript of Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz's teleconference on Tuesday with the Big Ten media:

Ferentz's opening statement:

"Certainly happy to get the victory. It was hard fought. A tough ball game. We anticipated that. Northern [Illinois] is a very good team and they're very well-coached. Played very well. A lot of great efforts out there and I'm certainly happy for Mike to be recognized by the Big Ten."

On evaluating running back Damon Bullock and what he thought Bullock did well against Northern Illinois:

"Well first of all, he finished the game. I think that's probably the biggest thing, the biggest accomplishment. He played a little bit last year. I think he had 10 carries the entire season. We had him going back between running back and receiver, so we weren't sure what to expect, quite frankly."

"Like a lot of guys, it was the first time he had played for any extensive period of time, so I'm just really happy with the way he performed overall. There are things he can do better. He knows that as well as anybody. But I think the biggest thing was he was able to play the entire game and do a good job that way."

On if he sees Bullock becoming a workhorse back:

“Well, we’ll see how it plays out as we move forward. I don’t know how much we envisioned that going into the game, quite frankly. It’s just the way things turned out. But the good news is his best quarter was the fourth quarter and it was true of our whole football team. It’s just good to see that. We’ll take it a week at a time. But I do know this – we’re going to have to play other backs, too. It’s a long season.”

On what concerns him the most after beating Northern Illinois last weekend:

“Well, like after any first game – at least typically – it has been 14 years now and I can’t remember one where you just walked out of there and said, ‘Boy, everything looked great.’ It’s really the first time that we’ve gone full speed against outstanding competition like that. So basically, every area. There’s not an area we can’t improve in and that’s going to be a fair amount I think for any team in the country. Typically, that has kind of been our M.O.

“We need to get better with each opportunity. I don’t think there’s an area we can’t improve in right now, so that’s kind of exciting on one hand. On the other hand, it’s very obvious that we need to improve fast or we’re going to be disappointed after Saturday’s game.”

On if there’s anything specific he plans to focus on in practice as Iowa prepares to play Iowa State:

“Well, not really. We are what we are and I think they are what they are. So it’s really a matter of how we match up against them. It really gets down to what we can control, which is our performance right now and how much can we try to improve during the course of the week. They played very well in their opener and I expect they’ll be a better team than we saw on film. But they played very, very well against a good team on Saturday. We got to keep our foot down and just try to move forward as fast as we can.”

On what made Iowa want to offer Bullock a scholarship even after he was dealing with an injury:

“You know, we were looking hard and we kind of came on him. We felt like he was being overlooked a little bit. But he played significantly his senior year. Missed that one year. But for whatever reason, people hadn’t thought he was a real good player. There were some things we were concerned about and it was ironic I guess. I wasn’t quite so sure how fast or nimble he was based on looking at his high school tape. I think he has got plenty of speed and is very, very nimble. The fact that we played him at receiver last year would probably indicate that.

“That’s probably the one thing – we didn’t see his ball skills necessarily. They didn’t throw to him an awful lot in high school. He does have very good ball skills. It has been a pleasant surprise and again, I think the biggest thing is we’re out there ready to ordain him as the next coming out, but he had a good game Saturday and the thing I was most pleased with is he played in the fourth quarter and played strong in the fourth quarter.”

On whether it’s a lot of work for a younger player like Bullock:

“Yeah, a muggy day. And then on top of it, when a guy plays in his first game, you usually burn a little bit more energy. I’ve seen that happen, even before the game starts. So the fact he was running strong in the fourth quarter, I think that was a real positive and it’s something we can build off of. Again, we’ll have to get some other guys involved now, too. Greg Garmon got his feet wet a little bit, so we’ll have to build on that and Mike Malloy as well.”

On what makes traveling to the West Coast for a game during this time of year challenging:

“You know, it’s probably the same reason it’s hard for them to

come our direction. I haven't done a study on that, but I know Hawaii struggles when they come to the mainland and they're tough at home. I can just speak to our most recent series. We played Arizona State and Arizona and split with both of those teams – won at home and lost on the road. The only disappointing thing was we played Arizona last time and Arizona State, we played late afternoon and I was hoping for 11 o'clock kickoffs for both of those games.

“So you deal with the time change, you deal with a little different environment certainly and it's tough going on the road no matter where you go, so I think all of those things combined makes it a factor. It's a little different if you get a chance to go and spend a week there to get acclimated, but that's usually not the case with an in-season game.”

On how he would evaluate his team's D-line play in the win over Northern Illinois:

“Yeah, Dom [Alvis] is probably our most experienced player and Joe [Gaglione] is a senior, a fifth-year senior. We were hopeful he had practiced well going back to the spring. We were hopeful that the accumulation of work – he has had a lot of injury issues and this was really the first time he had gotten to work for prolonged periods. But the whole group, it was a start.

“It wasn't pretty at all times, but outside of one play – and you can't say that in defense because if you give up big plays, you can't be consistently good on defense – but we gave up a big play in that second half, otherwise we played pretty good on defense. Got off the field and did a pretty good job that way. It was a starting point and that's really kind of the scenario for our whole team right now, a starting point.

“Again, we were thrilled to get the victory. The oddsmakers were apparently more optimistic than I was going in there, but I was just happy to come out with a win and I was really happy

with the way our guys competed and fought. They did a good job that way, but we have a lot of things to work on right now."

On the challenges Iowa State poses:

"First and foremost, the thing that jumps out at me – Paul Rhoads went to Iowa State and it's pretty clear to me now a couple of years later here – but he really had a good idea of what he envisioned happening there. I think everybody goes into a place with a plan, but how well do you stick to that plan? Are you able to build an identity? I think they've done a great job there in that regard.

"They've got an identity offensively, they've got an identity defensively and they do a great job on special teams. They've improved their personnel with each year. They always play hard. They play very smart and very sound and again, they play to their identity and what they've chosen to be. It has been very effective and very, very tough to defend their offensive package.

"Defensively, they make you try to beat them and that's easier said than done. They compete hard and play well. And special teams, they did a great job against us last year with special teams. They're a good football team that's well-coached and plays with great effort."

On how often he needs to use last year's loss to Iowa State as motivation for the players:

"I don't want to speak for their team, but I'm just guessing – I think everybody involved with this game historically is ready. Typically, both teams are very highly motivated. I don't know why they wouldn't be. This is a huge game in our state. We don't have a professional team in our state unless you want to count the [Iowa] Cubs, but that's a different sport. So it's a huge game in our state. It's great for the state and I don't think motivation is a problem on either side of the coin.

"As far as last year, I think the one thing about it is if we don't learn from what we didn't do well last year, we're going to fall victim to that again. As I said, I don't think they've changed a lot from my vantage point. They've only played one game, but they are what they are and they do it extremely well. They really took advantage of some of the mistakes we made last year and quite frankly, outplayed us, out-coached us. Basically in all three areas. We're going to have to do a better job."

On how game day communication went among the coaching staff given the changes made in the offseason:

"I think really well. You know, we, again, I don't think we're unique. I think everybody, especially when you have changes, probably works on that over the course of the preseason. I know that we did. But that's one thing I've been really pleased with going back to the first week of spring ball. I think everybody has really hit the ground running and did a nice job with regards to that."

"And you know, there's a feeling-out process certainly. It was a little different Saturday than maybe it was in the practices, but I think the guys have done a great job with that. We haven't made a big deal of it. I don't think it is a big deal unless we had prepared. I think everybody has been doing well that way. The big challenge for us right now is we've got to improve our play on the field with each week."

On why he felt Marcus Coker left Iowa to transfer to Stony Brook and what he'll do playing there now:

"I don't want to speak for Marcus, but what he brought to our team last year really was just outstanding play. He's a tough, competitive guy. He played two years ago as a true freshman for us. Had an injury early in camp, missed probably 5-6 weeks, then came back in his first start and had 100-plus yards on the road and then finished up as the MVP in our bowl"

game with 200-plus yards.

“He’s a strong, tough runner and Marcus is a great young man. So what he’ll bring for Stony Brook, I don’t know what they did last week and I don’t know what he did last week, but my guess is he’s going to do a very nice job there.”

Gable statue unveiled outside Carver



A statue of former Iowa wrestling coach Dan Gable was unveiled outside Carver-Hawkeye Arena during a ceremony on Wednesday, April 18, 2012.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – A statue of Iowa wrestling icon Dan Gable was unveiled outside Carver-Hawkeye Arena during a ceremony that took place Wednesday afternoon.

Below is video broken into two parts of Gable's speech given shortly after the bronze statue was introduced to those on hand at the ceremony. Among those who spoke prior to the unveiling were UI president Sally Mason, Iowa athletics director Gary Barta and current Iowa wrestling coach Tom Brands.

Carver-Hawkeye Arena will host the U.S. Olympic Wrestling Trials, which take place this weekend.

DAN GABLE, PART ONE:

DAN GABLE, PART TWO:

3/21/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 30 (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

HawkeyeDrive.com

After seven Big Ten teams qualified for the 2011 NCAA Tournament, only two remain as the Sweet 16 kicks off later this week.

One of those teams is fairly obvious in Ohio State. The Buckeyes, who hold the No. 1 seed in the East Regional,

cruised to victories this weekend over Texas-San Antonio and George Mason. The other team, however, is slightly unexpected. That would be the Wisconsin Badgers, who are the No. 4 seed in the Southeast Regional.

This should not feel too surprising. In terms of its seeding, Wisconsin was supposed to get this far. Finishing third in the Big Ten this season, the Badgers had the type of season most Sweet 16 teams typically have.

But Wisconsin came into this tournament limping. The regular season ended with a damaging loss at Ohio State, and it was followed up by an abysmal loss to Penn State in the Big Ten Tournament, a game where the Badgers held the Nittany Lions to 36 points, but could only muster 33 themselves. Most teams that hold an opponent under 40 points win, but this was not the case that night.

As a result, many felt Wisconsin came into this tournament very vulnerable. First, the Badgers had to travel all the way out to Tucson, Ariz., after letting what would have been a short bus trip to Chicago, Ill., slip through their fingertips. As if that was not enough, Wisconsin's second round opponent was a 13 seed in Belmont that won 30 games this season. Many felt an upset could be in the making.

The Badgers found a way to get by the Bruins, then faced a No. 5 seed in Kansas State that some felt could reach the Final Four even after failing to meet most of the preseason expectations laid on it.

Despite the fact that Kansas State guard Jacob Pullen scored 38 points, Wisconsin found away to emerge victorious, 70-65, over a more athletic Wildcat club.

Love him or hate him, a tip of the cap has to be given to Wisconsin head coach Bo Ryan. The Badgers have made the NCAA Tournament every season under his watch since he came to Madison, Wis., and this marks the fourth time he has guided

Wisconsin to the Sweet 16, where it will face eighth-seeded Butler after the Bulldogs shocked top-seeded Pittsburgh on March 19.

Should the Badgers prevail on March 24 down in New Orleans, Wisconsin would reach the Elite Eight for the first time since 2005, when it lost to eventual national champion North Carolina. Coming into this season, the thought of the Badgers advancing this far was unthinkable. Now, it's becoming a reality.

While this feels surprising what Wisconsin has accomplished, maybe it is not. After all, the Badgers did return senior Jon Leuer after he was first-team all-Big Ten in 2009-10, and reached that plateau again this season. Then there was the play of junior Jordan Taylor, who is arguably the top point guard in the country. Even though the offensive numbers were not there for Taylor against Kansas State last weekend, he still found a way to be a factor and made two enormous plays at the defensive end of the floor.

This Sweet 16 contest will be a test for Wisconsin, as losing to Butler would feel no different than NCAA Tournament exits the past few seasons from teams such as Cornell, Xavier, Davidson, and UNLV. But should the Badgers knock out the defending national runner-up, 40 minutes would stand between them and the Final Four. Again, no one was thinking this back in October.

Regardless of how this story ends, one thing is clear: The Wisconsin Badgers are in good hands when it comes to men's basketball.

3/14/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 29 (premium)

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By Brendan Stiles

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The week was certainly interesting for those invested in the Scarlet and Gray.

On the positive side of things, the Ohio State men's basketball team won both the Big Ten regular season title outright, and three games in Indianapolis, Ind., to win the 2011 Big Ten Tournament. As a result, the Buckeyes locked up the No. 1 overall seed in this year's NCAA Tournament and will begin their pursuit of the national championship on March 18 just a few hours north in Cleveland, Ohio.

But the week provided a mixed bag. Unfortunately for Buckeye fans, much of the talk didn't surround the recent success of Ohio State's basketball program, but rather the transgressions of its football program.

Last week, Ohio State head coach Jim Tressel was found to have been knowingly aware of NCAA violations taking place and failing to notify compliance of what occurred. At a press conference in Columbus on March 8, Ohio State athletics director Gene Smith (who also was the chairman of the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament selection committee) announced that Tressel would have to pay a \$250,000 fine, attend a compliance seminar, and be suspended for the Buckeyes' first

two games of the 2011 season against Akron and Toledo. Keep in mind that there are already five players, including quarterback Terrelle Pryor, that will serve five-game suspensions at the start of the 2011 season.

No matter how one slices and dices everything, what became clear following this press conference is that the program, and possibly the athletics department and university, are in some disarray.

When the school president replies to a question about dismissing Tressel for the violations by saying "I hope he doesn't dismiss me," that says everything one needs to know about Ohio State right now. When the football coach is not being held accountable by his university's president or by his athletics director, something is wrong.

The shame here is that Tressel has always come off as a likable guy. One would be hard-pressed to find any player or coach associated with Ohio State or with college sports that has a negative thing to say about the guy. Heck, back in October when he locked up (for now at least) his 100th victory at Ohio State, "State of the Big Ten" paid tribute to his accomplishments since taking over as the Buckeyes' head coach in 2001.

But now there is reservation. No matter what Tressel does from this point forward to try and rectify all of this, the stigma from this incident will stick with him. It will also stick with Ohio State. There is the saying that "perception is reality." Right now, Ohio State is perceived in a very negative light and will continue to be, perhaps even unjustly, for the foreseeable future.

The evidence against Tressel is damning to the point that many are saying the punishments he has been handed are not enough. He will not be fired for his actions (Ohio State president Gordon Gee already said so), but it is tough to argue that

coaches at other schools would manage to keep their jobs if such accusations were brought against them.

Simply put, this is one story that is not going away, and will not be going away anytime soon. Whether this leads to wins being vacated, who knows?

In the meantime, Buckeye fans at least have a basketball team to enjoy watching this month.

3/7/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 28 (premium)

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By Brendan Stiles

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The 2010-11 Big Ten season in men's basketball concluded last weekend, and later today, postseason honors will be handed out across the conference.

First, there are the individual honors of Player of the Year, Freshman of the Year, and Coach of the Year. Freshman of the Year should be a shoo-in for Ohio State's Jared Sullinger. The Buckeye forward was simply a beast all season long and all of the Big Ten "Freshman Player of the Week" honors make this choice a slam dunk.

Coach of the Year is a little more tricky because Thad Matta did lead the Buckeyes to a second straight Big Ten crown and Ohio State is currently ranked No. 1 in the country. All that being said, it's hard to overlook what Matt Painter has accomplished this season in West Lafayette, Ind.

When Purdue forward Robbie Hummel was ruled out for the entire season with another torn ACL last October, many who felt the Boilermakers had what it took to win the Big Ten and possibly even reach the Final Four backed off. There were still high expectations, but they were somewhat simmered.

All Purdue did under Painter's guidance was finish 14-4, coming up two games short of being co-Big Ten champions for the second straight season, thanks in large part to the efforts of seniors JaJuan Johnson and E'Twaun Moore. Even though the Boilermakers did not win the Big Ten, they still have a legit chance at a possible 2 seed in the NCAA Tournament, something many did not think was possible once Hummel got hurt.

Player of the Year is the biggest debate. Johnson has the numbers, leading the Big Ten in scoring, as well as blocked shots. However, this is one where Sullinger should and probably will win based off intangibles, the things one does not see in a box score.

As good as Ohio State is, without Sullinger, the Buckeyes probably do not win the league crown. They certainly would not be ranked No. 1 in the country at the moment and have a legitimate crack at the No. 1 overall seed in the NCAA Tournament later this month. What makes what Sullinger did even more impressive is that Ohio State lost a National Player of the Year in Evan Turner early to the NBA, and he had to fill that major void left in the Buckeye starting lineup. Not only did Sullinger do that, but he did so with flying colors.

When first team all-Big Ten is announced, Sullinger and

Johnson will both highlight this group. Another prominent name that will appear is Wisconsin point guard Jordan Taylor.

Here is what made Taylor so special to the Badgers this season. In addition to having the ability to take over games like he did in wins over Ohio State and Indiana this season, Taylor was third in the Big Ten in scoring, averaging 20.1 points per contest. But perhaps the most incredible statistic is his assist-to-turnover ratio of 4.63 in conference play. In other words, for every turnover he commits, Taylor averages nearly five assists to make up for that one giveaway.

That's not just the best ratio in the Big Ten, but one of the best ratios in all of college basketball.

The final two spots on the first team are debatable, but the two players who should make it are Penn State guard Talor Battle and Minnesota forward Trevor Mbakwe.

To simply say the Nittany Lions are not the 6 seed in this week's Big Ten Tournament without Battle would be a major understatement. Without the senior guard, Penn State might be sitting in the conference cellar again like it was last year. He was second in the conference in scoring, and led the Big Ten in 3-point field goals made, which is remarkable considering the accomplishments of Ohio State's lethal 3-point shooter, Jon Diebler.

As for Mbakwe, even though the Golden Gophers had a disappointing end to their season and finished ninth, he was one of the few bright spots for Minnesota. Mbakwe may have only averaged 14.1 points per game, but the junior led the conference in rebounding, averaging 11 boards per contest. In addition, his 14 and 11 made the Gopher junior the only Big Ten player to average a double-double in league play.

Again, he was the only player in the conference to average a double-double. Not Sullinger, not Johnson, but Mbakwe. If that is not good enough, what is?

This probably will not be how everything ultimately shakes out, but more so how it all should shake out. Tonight will make for an interesting night.

2/28/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 27 (premium)

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By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

Monday proved to be a pretty big day in the world of college football. Not because of anything that was taking place at the 2011 NFL Scouting Combine in Indianapolis, Ind., but because conferences like the Big East and the MAC revealed their conference football schedules for the upcoming 2011 season.

These aren't the only conferences to do something like this. The ACC just recently announced its conference schedule earlier this month.

The reason for making mention of the ACC doing this is because it's a conference in football that has two divisions not necessarily based on geography and a championship game in early December.

See where this is going yet?

It is absolutely in the Big Ten's best interests to never wait this long to announce conference schedules. Ever.

Unlike conferences like the ACC or Big East that are better known for basketball, the Big Ten's reputation has always been centered around football. Just look at some of the venues Big Ten teams play in.

Michigan has "The Big House." Ohio State has "The Horseshoe." Penn State has Beaver Stadium. All three of these stadiums hold over 100,000 spectators. These institutions and their campuses thrive on home game-days. When Penn State is playing at home in front of a sellout crowd, Beaver Stadium in State College becomes the third-largest city in the state of Pennsylvania, behind just Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

Simply put, places like State College thrive because of Penn State football, and the more known from a scheduling standpoint ahead of time, the better. Hotels in State College are almost impossible to find rooms at on weekends of games, and if someone is fortunate enough to find a hotel there, it's a hefty price to pay for two nights minimum.

With Nebraska joining the Big Ten, it probably is no different in Lincoln on fall Saturdays than in State College, or Ann Arbor, or Columbus, or even places like Madison and Iowa City, both of which are known for fun football atmospheres.

The beauty of all these places is that they are unlike the majority of environments that exist in college football. Part of that beauty comes from preparation, and the stakes are obviously bigger when other Big Ten teams come to town.

One of the smartest things the Big Ten did as soon as it announced how the divisions would be divided last September was it also assembled conference schedules together for the 2011 and 2012 upcoming seasons. Fans, local businesses, and of course, the athletics departments among the 12 Big Ten schools can plan ahead for the weekends that their respective teams

are at home.

One of the dumbest things the conference can do is wait until February of 2013 to announce the dates and times for all 2013 Big Ten games. This is something that ought to be announced no later than the conclusion of the 2011 season. Waiting until 6-7 months before a season begins to set dates up, especially when it is not as though conference schedules are round-robin, would only do more harm than good in terms of providing the same sort of culture that exists among Big Ten country right now.

Conference schedules have almost always been put together years in advance. Here's hoping that never changes for any of the soon-to-be 12 Big Ten teams.

2/21/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 26 (premium)

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On Monday, the Big Ten announced tip-off dates for games taking place on the final weekend of the regular season. Historically, this has been a common practice by the conference because it allows networks such as CBS and ESPN the

opportunity to promote the teams who have a shot at winning the regular season crown.

With Ohio State, Purdue, and Wisconsin atop the Big Ten standings, those two networks opted to show their games, which left the Big Ten Network to schedule Indiana's game at Illinois on the morning on March 5, which is a Saturday. As a result, Hoosier head coach Tom Crean became irate and went on a rant via Twitter about having 36 hours (actually, 37 hours because of time zone change) between games, as Indiana plays at home against Wisconsin on March 3.

Crean is not the only Big Ten coach who has been upset recently about the Big Ten's scheduling procedure. Following Northwestern's 73-70 win over Iowa on Feb. 17, Wildcat head coach Bill Carmody was ticked about having only one day between that game and Northwestern's contest at Indiana on Feb. 19, a game the Wildcats won, 70-64.

Like Northwestern, Iowa also had a game on Feb. 19 against Michigan, and that was in the afternoon as opposed to the Wildcats' game being that night. Meanwhile, Ohio State is currently in its day between games at Purdue on Feb. 20 and a home contest against Illinois on Feb. 22.

With all this in mind, here's a suggestion for the Big Ten when Nebraska does start competing in the conference next season: Eliminate the wild card scheduling. Yes, it would upset some of the higher-ups at networks like CBS and ESPN, but doing this would serve the best interests of many people, including your soon-to-be 12 men's basketball programs first and foremost.

Since the Big Ten Network was established in 2007, conference games have typically appeared on five out of the seven days in the week – Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday. This was done to ensure that when a conference game took place, it was the only one taking place during its given two-

hour window. From a marketing perspective, that has been successful because it has allowed the Big Ten to showcase all of its schools at different times.

Following this model can still work when Nebraska joins, but instead of having what are dubbed "wild card" games where the dates and times are not decided until later in the season, having set times established the entire way just makes sense.

Have two games each on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, then have three games each on Saturday and Sunday. Then make it so the four teams playing on a Thursday during a given week are all automatically playing on the Sunday that same week so every team is assured a minimum of two days between conference games. Then even it out so that way all 12 teams have at least three appearances on each of those days, including a minimum of one home and one road.

What this would do is make scheduling as close to equal as it would get in the conference because right now, all indications have been that there will still be 18 conference games and that it would be divided so each school plays seven teams twice and the other four teams once.

By establishing dates and times for all 18 games right away, the conference is doing a service to many – the coaches, the players, the schools in terms of being able to sell tickets, media who cover teams regularly in terms of being able to coordinate travel with their respective outlets.

It just makes sense, and is something the Big Ten ought to explore before next season starts, especially since doing this still ensures that every team gets the same amount of exposure it would be getting anyway.

Just something to think about so that way at this time next year, there are not more coaches getting bitter about the cards they are dealt.

2/14/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 25 (premium)

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By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

If the Big Ten has proven anything in college basketball this season, it is that point guard remains the game's most important position.

Sure, Ohio State freshman forward Jared Sullinger will probably come away with the conference's Player of the Year honor among many accolades sure to come his way. But the fact of the matter is point guard still makes or breaks teams.

Let's start with Wisconsin's Jordan Taylor, who was just named the Big Ten's Player of the Week, and for good reason. Taylor, who came into this season as somewhat of an unknown because the Badgers had Trevon Hughes the past few seasons, was the sole reason why Wisconsin managed to beat then-No. 1 Ohio State on Feb. 12 at the Kohl Center in Madison, Wis. The Badgers were down double-digits in the second half against a team that was the only unbeaten remaining in college basketball, and the junior point guard just took the game over.

Taylor was either making big buckets for Wisconsin, or was

getting teammates open looks that resulted in points for the Badgers. Regardless, he was the focal point as to why the Badgers pulled off their biggest regular season victory in 49 years.

Continue to look around the conference, and look at the Buckeyes. He might not start, but Aaron Craft has been as good a freshman as there is in the Big Ten this season. He not only comes off the bench and gives Ohio State a spark, but he consistently makes plays when he steps on the court. If he is not getting teammates involved, he is there on the defensive end stripping the ball away from opposing players and setting up transition points for the Buckeyes.

Then there is Penn State, who has been somewhat of a surprise this season, even with all the experience it brought back. Look at Talor Battle, who is currently second in the Big Ten in scoring behind only Purdue's JaJuan Johnson. Battle considered going pro after last season, but never signed with an agent and ultimately decided to return to Penn State. This Nittany Lion team would be nowhere decent to what it is right now without Battle, plain and simple.

Even Michigan has gotten stellar play from its guards this season, led by sophomore Darius Morris at the point. Morris posted a triple-double for the Wolverines against Iowa back on Jan. 30, and he currently averages 6.8 assists per game, which leads the Big Ten.

Point guard play has also been somewhat of a downfall this season, or in some cases, a situation where there is not much depth available for some teams. Iowa lost Cully Payne to an injury that still appears to be season-ending (nothing has been made official yet, however), and as a result, head coach Fran McCaffery has found himself relying on a junior college transfer in Bryce Cartwright to play the bulk of the Hawkeyes' minutes at the point this season.

Cartwright has improved with each game and is starting to become more consistent, but the lack of depth at the position has hurt Iowa at times this season. Same goes for Minnesota, who right now is without Al Nolen due to injury. With Nolen out, shooting guard Blake Hoffarber has now assumed the point guard responsibilities for the Golden Gophers.

Then there are two senior players that came into this season with high expectations both individually and for their teams, yet really have not lived up to that hype. One of those guys is Michigan State senior Kalin Lucas. Now granted, Lucas had to recover from multiple injuries sustained late last season, but he also came into this season as the Big Ten's Preseason Player of the Year, and Michigan State was ranked No. 2 in the country preseason behind only defending national champion Duke.

So far this season, Lucas has posted solid numbers for the Spartans. But he has also drawn the ire of head coach Tom Izzo at times this season as well for some of his decision-making. The same can also be said for Illinois senior Demetri McCamey. Even though he is currently second to Morris in the conference in assists, McCamey was taken out of the starting lineup by head coach Bruce Weber prior to the Fighting Illini's Feb. 10 contest at Minnesota.

Both Michigan State and Illinois have had their struggles this season, and a lot of fingers have been pointed at both Lucas and McCamey. Whether that criticism is warranted does not really matter here. The fact is they are being looked at as their teams' respective leaders, and blame certainly heads their way when things are tough.

Now this is not to mean that post-players should not be in the spotlight. In addition to Sullinger, Purdue's Johnson currently leads the Big Ten in scoring, and players like Wisconsin's Jon Leuer, Minnesota's Trevor Mbakwe, and Michigan State's Draymond Green have all had productive seasons.

But with that being said, it all comes back to play from the point guards. Just look at the conference standings, because that ought to be enough evidence.

2/7/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 24 (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

HawkeyeDrive.com

As the conference approaches its final month of the regular season before the Big Ten Men's Basketball Tournament in Indianapolis, Ind., it does not appear to look as strong as many expected at the start of the season.

Entering the Feb. 8 showdown between Indiana and No. 14 Purdue, not only are there just three Big Ten teams ranked in the latest AP Top 25, but those same three teams are the only ones with winning records in league play.

Yes, Ohio State is still the nation's only unbeaten and ranked No. 1 in the country, but that could easily change this coming weekend when the Buckeyes travel to the Kohl Center in Madison, Wis., to face the 13th-ranked Badgers.

Right now, Illinois would be the No. 4 seed in next month's Big Ten Tournament currently possessing a 5-5 conference

record. Then there's a three-way tie for fifth place between Penn State, Michigan State and Minnesota, who are all a game below .500 in Big Ten play at 5-6.

Sure, the argument could be made that these teams are all beating up on each other, and that would be true to an extent.

But upon further examination, all four of those middle tier teams have some losses that would look bad on any NCAA Tournament résumé. Of these teams, the one with the best shot to be dancing this March is the Golden Gophers. Minnesota is coming off a disappointing week that included a 60-57 loss at Indiana on Feb. 2, but the Golden Gophers are just outside the top 25 (they're actually ranked 25th in the Coaches poll) and they are done playing all three of Ohio State, Purdue, and Wisconsin.

In other words, being that No. 4 seed is still a distinct possibility for Tubby Smith's squad if it handles its business in its final seven conference games.

Illinois probably has a chance, but the Fighting Illini have already lost road games to Indiana and Northwestern, and the schedule does it no favors. Road games remain still against Minnesota, Michigan State, Ohio State and Purdue.

Penn State has been somewhat of a surprise in league play early on, with its most notable win right now being a 56-52 victory on Jan. 29 at home over Wisconsin. But a second loss over the weekend to Michigan really doesn't help its résumé, one that is still subpar at best. The Nittany Lions still have a rematch with the Badgers in Madison, as well as a home game late in the season against Ohio State, but right now, Penn State does not look like an NCAA tourney team.

Then there is Michigan State, a team that right now is like watching road kill get feasted on by a bunch of vultures. The current freefall this program is in is beyond inexplicable.

Coming into this season, the Spartans were not only the consensus pick to win the Big Ten, but they were ranked second in the country. There was good reason for this, too. Michigan State has played in each of the last two Final Fours and had plenty of experience returning.

Up until a few weeks ago, the Spartan résumé lacked luster, but did not appear to have any head-scratching losses aside from maybe losing at Penn State on Jan. 8. But of Michigan State's five Big Ten wins, the last three have all been decided in overtime, at home no less.

After losing at home to Michigan for the first time since Tom Izzo's first season as head coach in East Lansing, the Spartans beat Indiana in overtime by one point, but proceeded to hit rock bottom on the road this past week. First, Michigan State lost by 20 points to an Iowa team that was alone in last place. Then last weekend, Wisconsin, one of those teams the Spartans beat at home in overtime, gave Michigan State a woodshed beating at the Kohl Center.

Back in October, the feeling seemed to be that six teams would for sure make the NCAA Tournament, with Northwestern being a possible seventh squad to join the fray. This could still end up being the case, but right now, it sure does not look that way.

If this was Selection Sunday, there would probably be four, maybe five teams dancing (barring a stunning turn of events at the Big Ten Tournament). Minnesota and Illinois would be the bubble teams, and with the two meeting at Williams Arena on Feb. 10, that game could go a long way in deciding things if this current situation sticks to form.

This all goes back to the phrase that "perception is reality." Right now, the national perception of the Big Ten being an overrated conference looks more and more like reality. This is all worth keeping an eye on, especially as Selection Sunday

draws closer.

Because if the Big Ten gets in a lower number than originally expected and any of those teams lose earlier than anticipated, any credibility gained over the past couple of years would slowly be brushed aside.

Like it or not, that is the truth, and the truth can sometimes hurt. Just ask Izzo.

1/31/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 23 (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

HawkeyeDrive.com

On Jan. 30, it was announced that all 13 members of the Iowa football team who were hospitalized for symptoms of Rhabdomyolysis were released from the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics.

Over the past week since the news initially broke, a lot had been written not only about this situation in Iowa City, but how it was handled. The fact that neither head coach Kirk Ferentz nor athletics director Gary Barta were present for a news conference held to discuss the matter ruffled plenty of feathers, to say the least. Some articles written over the

past week even went as far as suggesting that Ferentz does not care enough for his current players since he was recruiting when these 13 student athletes were checked in.

What appeared to get lost at times though, was the actual story, the one that should have been at the forefront from the very beginning, that 13 players were all in the hospital being treated for Rhabdomyolysis.

It was disturbing to see how a lot was being conjured up nationwide about how the university botched the news conference it had in Iowa City on Jan. 26. It was sad to see how emotionally revved up people were when it came to the whereabouts of Ferentz and Barta. It is even embarrassing that an employee of the university would jeopardize their professional career by leaking the results of drug tests done on the 13 players while they were being treated, a violation of HIPAA that will absolutely get that person fired pending the results of the UIHC's investigation into the matter.

But nothing was more painful than what those 13 players went through, and for those on the outside, hearing about it. Nothing.

The story was never about Ferentz. It was never about Barta. It was about 13 student-athletes all coming down with symptoms of a muscular syndrome that did damage to their kidneys. Any one of those 13 could have ended up with permanent kidney damage, and yet there were other things related that got more press, that got more scrutiny. If any of those 13 did end up with permanent damage to their kidneys that not only ended their football careers, but jeopardized their lives going forward, that is what would have been the most depressing, gut-wrenching news of all.

Now that all 13 football players are out of the hospital, now is a more appropriate time to be addressing some of the side stories, and seeing how the independent investigation being

conducted by the university's Board of Regents unfolds. Not it there was not an appropriate time originally, as those things were all being discussed. But how much of that mattering paled in comparison to that of someone's health.

It already had to be difficult for the parents of those hospitalized to see their kid in pain. Having to think about other things like what happened at a news conference are the furthest thoughts from their minds, as they should have been.

Now would it have been wise for either Ferentz or Barta (or both) to be on hand to discuss the situation (or at least what they could of it) when that news conference took place? Probably. Is it wrong for anyone to be critical of Ferentz for not being back in Iowa City sooner? Not at all. But it is also unfair to just throw everyone under the bus like some were doing.

Maybe it was a day or two late, but at least Ferentz did comment on the matter, and he did eventually make it back to Iowa City to check on his players and console their families. It also appears obvious that he was remorseful for not making it back home sooner. The only ones who should truly be allowed to judge him at this point are the players and their families.

More will arise in the days, weeks, and even months about what actually took place that led to everything that happened. But right now is as good a time as there is to remember the importance of keeping everything in perspective.

Right now, be thankful that the 13 players that were hospitalized have recovered enough to be discharged from UIHC and hopefully, those 13 players (as well as those not hospitalized) can move on and try to live their normal, everyday lives in addition to playing football at Iowa.