

1/24/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 22 (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

Last weekend saw a Sunday that many sports fans circle on their calendars, as the AFC and NFC Championship Games were played to determine who would play two weeks from now in Super Bowl XLV.

In the world of Big Ten men's basketball, there were two games that took place on Jan. 23. Because of the close proximity from Evanston, Ill. to Chicago, Northwestern actually moved up its game against Wisconsin a half-hour to accommodate locals who had a vested interest in the NFC game between the Chicago Bears and Green Bay Packers. Meanwhile, Iowa played Indiana at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in a game that tipped off at the exact same time as the football game at Soldier Field.

Once upon a time, there was mystique for a Big Ten men's basketball game being on a Sunday afternoon in the winter. Most of the undercard games, if you will, would be played on that Saturday, while the marquee game of the weekend would be featured on Sunday.

The Big Ten should be commended for taking the steps to not only ensure that every conference game not picked up by either CBS or ESPN airs on the Big Ten Network, but for also taking the steps of giving each game an exclusive time slot. In other

words, there is not a situation where there are two Big Ten contests taking place simultaneously.

With that being said, having men's basketball games compete for TV ratings with any NFL playoff game makes zero sense, and it is something that really needs to be looked into.

Now to be fair, the Big Ten has a strict scheduling policy in place for conference games that would have made moving that Iowa-Indiana contest up one day impossible. Under Big Ten guidelines, each team is granted a minimum of two days between conference games, with the exception of any "wild card" game that originally appeared on a team's schedule with dates and times to be determined (these are games towards the end of the regular season prior to the Big Ten Tournament).

But let's be honest here. There are very few things on any TV channel during the month of January that gain higher ratings than any NFL playoff game, regardless of location. Which is why an effort ought to be made by the Big Ten Network specifically to work time slots for games around the NFL playoffs.

Because there are some Saturday NFL playoff games, it probably is not possible to completely work around them. But that does not mean it cannot be done.

The NFL establishes the times for playoff games far in advance, and it never changes. What the Big Ten ought to consider doing is have any men's basketball game taking place around the same time be aired nationally on a channel like ESPN. By doing this, it can save itself some embarrassment for ratings on its own TV network. Then have the games that do air on the Big Ten Network never conflict with the NFL playoffs.

And it is not like this is the first time something like what occurred with the Wisconsin-Northwestern game has happened. In fact, just last year, Indiana pushed a game it had at Assembly Hall against Iowa last season back one hour so it would not

conflict with the second half of the AFC game, which featured the Indianapolis Colts and was played at Lucas Oil Stadium.

Iowa might not have an NFL team, but when there's a playoff game featuring two NFL teams with enormous fan bases in Iowa that determines one of the Super Bowl participants, it is hard to blame any fan who decided to stay home and watch football.

As far as the niche or olympic sports are concerned, the truth is those who like any of those enough will attend. For example, if there was an Iowa wrestling match during an NFL playoff game featuring two non-Midwest teams, there are enough followers of Iowa wrestling that are more likely to attend the meet as opposed to staying home like they might do for a men's basketball game that actually generates revenue.

If there was a Northwestern or Illinois gymnastics meet during the Bears-Packers game on Sunday, those who are passionate about those gymnastics programs are still going to attend. Casual fans might not, but every program has a loyal following, regardless of how well-reknown that sport might be throughout the Big Ten.

Again, this is probably something that will continue to be a recurring problem year after year. But that does not mean there should not be any sort of conversation to fix this.

It is in the best interests of the Big Ten, the Big Ten Network, and the 11 (soon-to-be 12) schools that are conference members that something ought to be done.

1/17/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 21 (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 Monday, the Ohio State Buckeyes capitalized on defending national champion Duke's loss to Florida State last week and are now ranked No. 1 nationally in college basketball.

What makes Ohio State's success this season so incredible is that the bar for this team was so high after winning both a share of the Big Ten regular season crown and the Big Ten Tournament, and the Buckeyes have only gotten better.

They are currently one of only four unbeaten teams in all of college basketball – the others being Kansas, San Diego State, and Syracuse.

What makes this even more incredible is that when this week's AP poll was released, there were six Big Ten teams in the top 25.

This is a testament to the impact Thad Matta has had on the Ohio State program since taking over in 2004.

It is stressed repeatedly by those associated with the sport how recruiting has such a vital impact. The argument can be made that since Matta arrived in Columbus, no one in the Big Ten has recruited better.

In 2006, he brought in a heralded class of freshmen featuring Mike Conley, Jr., and Greg Oden, who many thought could have been a No. 1 NBA draft pick as a high school junior in Indianapolis and ended up being taken No. 1 overall in 2007 by the Portland Trail Blazers. That team went to the Final Four and ended up losing the national championship game that year to Florida, who was the defending champion.

Then fast forward to last year. Matta is coaching the best player in the country at the time in Evan Turner, a man who was a threat for a triple-double every single night he stepped on the floor for Ohio State. Turner ended up being the second overall pick by the Philadelphia 76ers in last year's NBA Draft, but not before he led the Buckeyes to Big Ten regular season and tournament titles, and a trip to the Sweet 16.

Aside from Turner, every other starter from last year's squad is back for Ohio State. Junior guard William Buford was the Big Ten's Freshman of the Year two seasons ago. Senior Jon Diebler is one of the nation's top 3-point shooters, as he currently averages 49.5 percent shooting from beyond the arc. Senior center Dallas Lauderdale provides the Buckeyes with size in the paint and is a beast off the boards. David Lighty, a fifth-year senior, brings that championship-type experience having been a part of that 2007 Final Four team at Ohio State.

Then there's Jared Sullinger, who right now might be the best player in the Big Ten, and at the very least is a guy who will play in the NBA someday. Right now, Sullinger averages 17.6 points and 9.9 rebounds per game.

Throw in freshman guard Aaron Craft as a sixth man, and it is clear why the Buckeyes are so highly-touted right now.

Maybe this team does not win a national championship, or even get to the Final Four. But if Ohio State does manage to repeat as conference champions, there is a good chance of the Buckeyes being a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament two months

from now.

This is the kind of team everyone ought to be keeping their eyes on. Not just now while the Buckeyes are ranked No. 1 in the country, but throughout the course of this regular season.

1/10/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 20 (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 was expected following Michigan's 52-14 loss in the Gator Bowl to Mississippi State on New Year's Day, Michigan athletics director David Brandon made the move to fire head coach Rich Rodriguez.

The most telling comment Brandon made at a news conference announcing Rodriguez's dismissal was that in the three years Rodriguez was coaching the Wolverines, Rodriguez never "had a peaceful night sleep" in Ann Arbor. That is not something someone just says *impasse*.

Look, the evidence for severing ties with the man many called "RichRod" was insurmountable. So much so that it is a cruel twist of irony that this happened following Rodriguez's lone winning season at Michigan. There is no need here to rehash

all the specifics, but simply put, the move was one that needed to be done, maybe perhaps sooner than it actually was done.

As of Monday, there were two coaching candidates that seemed to stand apart from the rest – LSU head coach Les Miles, and San Diego State head coach Brady Hoke. Honestly, either man would be a solid fit.

Miles was an offensive lineman in the 1970s and played for Bo Schembechler. In fact, when LSU was on its way to winning a national championship under Miles, his name was a hot commodity to replace then-outgoing Michigan head coach Lloyd Carr. If he does make the move to Ann Arbor from Baton Rouge, La., it would be following a very similar script to how North Carolina lured Roy Williams away from Kansas to coach its men's basketball team.

Then there is Hoke, who just completed his second season at San Diego State, one where he guided the Aztecs to a win in the Poinsettia Bowl. Hoke has ties to Michigan as well. He was the team's defensive line coach and also assumed the title of associate head coach for the first eight seasons of the Carr era. During that span, Michigan won a share of the national championship in 1997, and won five games against its hated rival, Ohio State.

There is no doubt that if Miles is there for the taking, that is who Michigan covets more. But Hoke is not a bad fallback. It would be somewhat reminiscent of when Iowa hired Kirk Ferentz to replace Hayden Fry, and that has not worked out too badly for the Hawkeyes now, has it?

When Hoke left his alma mater of Ball State in 2008 – that year, he guided the Cardinals to a 12-win campaign – to coach at San Diego State, the Aztecs were one of the worst teams in the Mountain West and one of the worst programs in college football. In two years, he got them to a winning season and

the school's first bowl victory in decades.

Hoke might not be the immediate quick fix, but he knows and understands the culture surrounding Michigan football. He is a guy that would fit right in.

Whichever way Michigan ends up going, either guy could do the job. Whoever it is will definitely need to. Right now, Michigan is grouped with teams like Indiana and Minnesota, which also made coaching changes following the conclusions of their respective seasons.

Getting back to the same level of respect programs like Wisconsin and Ohio State are currently getting is going to be paramount for this program, not just in the immediate future, but in the long term as well.

1/3/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 19 (premium)

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By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

There is no way to sugarcoat this: The Big Ten's reputation as a power football conference took a nosedive on New Year's Day, and the ridicule for this is deserving.

When the eight bowl games featuring conference teams were first announced, the difficulty of every game was apparent. But what was also apparent was the Big Ten's need to carry over 2010's success into 2011.

So far, Iowa and Illinois (perhaps both surprisingly) each held their ends of the bargain. The Hawkeyes upset No. 14 Missouri in the Insight Bowl on Dec. 28, while the Fighting Illini defeated Baylor in the Texas Bowl the following day. As well, No. 6 Ohio State plays in the Allstate Sugar Bowl on Tuesday in New Orleans against No. 8 Arkansas, so any criticism that could come the Buckeyes' way needs to be delayed until that game's conclusion.

But New Year's Day. Zero wins, five losses. Regardless of school affiliation, this is an awful pill to swallow if you're Big Ten commissioner Jim Delany, or anyone else associated with the conference in any form.

Warranted or not, conferences are ultimately judged on how their schools perform in bowl games. What happened on New Year's Day is simply an embarrassment. Add in newcomer Nebraska looking dreadful in losing the Holiday Bowl to a Washington team it crushed back in September, and it is hard to blame anyone for ridiculing the Big Ten's shortcomings right now.

By going 0-5 on New Year's Day, the conference failed to have a single New Year's Day bowl winner for the first time since Jan. 1, 2002. But on that day, it was only Michigan, Ohio State, and Illinois (who won the Big Ten, but was sent to the Sugar Bowl) that lost. It should also be noted all three of those defeats came to teams from the SEC.

This year, the Big Ten did lose all three New Year's Day bowls pitted against SEC opponents. To its credit, at least Penn State put up somewhat of a fight before Florida eventually pulled away and won the Outback Bowl. Meanwhile, Michigan and

No. 7 Michigan State laid giant eggs, which will be expanded on a bit later.

First though, let's get to the other two losses, both of which were relatively close. Northwestern lost 45-38 to Texas Tech in the inaugural TicketCity Bowl. Now, the Wildcats might have won this game had quarterback Dan Persa not been hurt, and they deserve a little credit for fighting their way back from a 31-9 deficit.

But with that said, until Northwestern finally ends this bowl-victory drought (now at 61 years and counting), this is a part of the program's identity it will have to continue dealing with.

As for the Rose Bowl, no one should take anything away from what No. 3 TCU managed to accomplish by beating No. 5 Wisconsin in Pasadena last weekend. However, it is certainly fair to question what the Badgers were doing in terms of offensive play-calling.

In hindsight, most would probably agree that this year, Wisconsin proved to be the best representative for the conference in this year's Rose Bowl. But like it or not, for every person applauding TCU's achievements, there is someone else ridiculing the Badgers for losing to a team from the Mountain West. As unfair as that might be to both teams, it is the truth. No one in Badgerland was feeling good after that game.

Now back to the Michigan teams, which might have both been better not showing up. The Spartans lost the Capital One Bowl to a 15th-ranked Alabama squad that proved to be far superior, and it is not so much Michigan State losing that was bothersome, but how it lost. The Crimson Tide were ahead 49-0 in the fourth quarter before the Spartans scored to avoid the shutout. Brutal.

The biggest shame in this if you are a Spartan fan is that

now, everyone looks at Michigan State finishing 11-2 and remains not only skeptical about that program, but about the entire conference as well.

And Michigan. Early on, the Wolverines looked like they would give No. 21 Mississippi State all it could handle in the Gator Bowl. But by halftime, the outcome was all but determined. Worse yet for Michigan, the pressure cooker shot up even higher with both head coach Rich Rodriguez and defensive coordinator Greg Robinson, both of whom have been the butts of many, many jokes around the country.

Sure, the ACC and Big East both may have looked a lot less impressive between September and December. Right now though, all anyone is talking about (besides next week's national championship game) is the pitiful display put on by Big Ten teams this past New Year's Day.

For those already attempting to look ahead in 2011, it feels as though the conference has suddenly become much more wide open than it might have been at this time last week. Check that, both divisions appear to be wide open, not just the conference in general.

But what will really hurt the Big Ten heading into next season is that when preseason polls are put together, those who vote are going to remember what just occurred, and like it or not, it will carry over into how each voter casts its preseason ballots.

Is it a shame? Yes. But that is the reality. That is what happens when a conference loses five bowl games within hours of one another.

12/27/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 18 (premium)

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By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

As the year winds down, this is an appropriate time to reflect back on what turned out to be a monumental 2010 for the Big Ten conference.

It began last January when both the Ohio State Buckeyes and Iowa Hawkeyes won their respective BCS games. Ohio State defeated Pac-10 champion Oregon in the Rose Bowl, while Iowa manhandled ACC champion Georgia Tech in the Orange Bowl. Add wins by Penn State in the Capital One Bowl and Wisconsin in the Champs Sports Bowl, and the conference compiled a winning record in bowls last season after going 1-6 in 2008-09.

Meanwhile, Super Bowl XLIV was won by the New Orleans Saints, and their leader was named the game's Most Valuable Player. Drew Brees, the quarterback who guided Purdue to a Big Ten crown in 2000 and a trip to the 2001 Rose Bowl had finally cemented himself as one of the league's elite quarterbacks, joining the likes of former Michigan signal-caller Tom Brady.

From there, the Big Ten's reputation in men's basketball also began to really take off. Although only five teams qualified for the NCAA Tournament, there was one – Michigan State – that reached its second consecutive Final Four and third in six years under head coach Tom Izzo.

In fact, there was a three-way tie for first place between the Spartans, Purdue Boilermakers, and Ohio State Buckeyes, who possessed the National Player of the Year in Evan Turner (also the second overall pick in the NBA Draft by the Philadelphia 76ers), and won the tiebreaker for the top seed in the Big Ten Tournament. Ohio State would win the 2010 Big Ten Tournament, thanks in large part to Turner's buzzer-beating 3-pointer in the quarterfinals against Michigan.

In the championship game, the Buckeyes defeated an up-and-coming Minnesota program led by former Kentucky head coach Tubby Smith. The Golden Gophers pulled off an improbable run as a No. 6 seed by reaching the title game at Consecro Fieldhouse, and it proved to be enough as far as being one of the last "bubble teams" to find itself dancing last March.

Then came the summer, when perhaps the biggest news of the year in college sports, period, occurred.

Nebraska, a school that was forever associated with the Big 12 and what used to be the Big 8, was welcomed in by commissioner Jim Delany. The Big Ten had finally secured that 12th member it had longed for. Finally, divisions could be assembled in football, as well as a conference championship game.

This all came to fruition sooner than expected, but nevertheless, the Cornhuskers made a significant jump that looks to pay off for Nebraska down the road.

As a result, the entire country was buzzing. Fans all over from other various conferences began wondering what would happen next. Other transitions have been made since Nebraska, but none of them were to the same degree.

Prior to the beginning of the college football season, the Big Ten announced who would be in each division. It may not have been decided the way most fans probably would have preferred (a straight East-West split), but what resulted were two divisions built primarily on competitive balance over the past

18 years. In one division would be Illinois, Indiana, Ohio State, Penn State, Purdue, and Wisconsin. In the other would be Iowa, Michigan, Michigan State, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Northwestern.

Conference schedules for 2011 and 2012 were completely revised. In addition, "protected rivalries" were established in order to keep games between interdivisional opponents such as Ohio State-Michigan.

As the 2010 Big Ten season progressed, three different coaches reached milestone win plateaus. In October, Ohio State's Jim Tressel earned his 100th career victory as the Buckeyes' head coach, a position he has held for 10 seasons. Then on the same day, Iowa's Kirk Ferentz won his 100th game and inside a surreal Beaver Stadium, Penn State legend Joe Paterno won his 400th game as the Nittany Lions' head coach after Penn State came from behind to defeat Northwestern.

Speaking of the Wildcats, Northwestern found a way to promote itself in the Chicagoland area more than ever before by getting its home game against in-state rival Illinois to be played at Wrigley Field, home of the Chicago Cubs. It was the first football game played at the Friendly Confines in over 40 years, and while only one end zone was used as a safety precaution, it still gave the program exposure it desperately was seeking.

The 2010 football season culminated with something that will never happen again – another 3-way tie. Like the basketball one, it featured Ohio State and Michigan State. But the third team to comprise this trio of 11-1 teams was Wisconsin. Although the Badgers lost to the Spartans in East Lansing, Mich., they did beat the Buckeyes at Camp Randall Stadium. And when the final BCS Standings were released, it was Bret Bielema's Wisconsin Badgers booking their trip to Pasadena, Calif., where it will play New Year's Day against an unbeaten TCU squad.

With the conference holding its inaugural Big Ten Championship Game in 2011 at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis, Ind., there will now always be one team that can outright call itself a conference champion.

But while the Badgers and their fans are the ones that came up smelling roses, Ohio State and Michigan State both have reasons to hold their heads high. The Buckeyes earned a share of their sixth straight Big Ten crown, which is not only unprecedented, but was enough to get Ohio State a spot in the Sugar Bowl, a sixth consecutive BCS bowl appearance under Tressel and eighth in the last nine years.

As for the Spartans, this marked the first time they had won even a share of the Big Ten since 1990. It didn't result in a BCS bowl game, but considering everything Michigan State went through at the start of the season with head coach Mark Dantonio suffering a heart attack and missing two games (including that critical win over Wisconsin), this was still a storybook season in East Lansing.

Finally, Delany finally revealed both the conference's new logo going forward, as well as the names of the football divisions next season. Neither the logo nor the names "Legends" and "Leaders" received much fanfare publicly (if at all), but at least Delany said the division names would be reconsidered.

As 2011 approaches, it will be interesting to see what type of impact Nebraska's addition will have on the conference, not just in football, but in all sports. It will be interesting to see how much longer Paterno remains in charge at Penn State. It will be interesting to see just how many basketball teams make the NCAA Tournament and if one of them (Northwestern) finally breaks through for the first time ever.

If you are a fan of any of the 12 schools, this is great time to be associated with the Big Ten. Because for now at least,

the future appears bright.

12/20/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 17 (premium)

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By Brendan Stiles

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One of the more bizarre scenes you will ever see in college basketball took place over the weekend. Inside the Breslin Center in East Lansing, Mich., the Michigan State Spartans were playing, and head coach Tom Izzo was not on the bench coaching.

Izzo was suspended from the Spartans' 90-51 win over Prairie View A&M on Dec. 18 as a result of a secondary NCAA violation having to do with someone with ties to a potential recruit receiving money for working a camp said recruit didn't end up attending.

Say whatever about Izzo being punished and suspended from his duties as a head coach, but given what actually occurred, this is not something that should taint Izzo's reputation as a college basketball head coach.

This is the same guy that turned down a chance to coach the Cleveland Cavaliers this summer and stick with the program he

built into a perennial giant. The same guy that has guided Michigan State to six Final Four appearances and a national championship back in 2000. The same guy that has the Spartans poised at another conference title run and possibly a third straight trip to the Final Four.

Izzo admitted embarrassment by this whole mini-episode that took place recently, and as ridiculous as the violation seems, he did pay his dues to the NCAA.

Think about all the different college basketball coaches out there that for whatever reason are associated with illegal recruiting, even if there is no proof of any wrongdoing. Chances are pretty solid that Izzo's name never comes to mind. In fact, that could probably be said for most (if not all) of the coaches working in the Big Ten right now.

Izzo is the dean of coaches in the conference at this time, and he is probably the most successful head coach the Big Ten has had with men's basketball since Indiana severed ties with Bob Knight back in 2000. He is a guy that many associated with the game believe has integrity and does everything at Michigan State the right way.

Secondary violations happen at plenty of programs (Iowa recently self-reported itself to the NCAA for secondary recruiting violations). There is a reason they are considered "secondary." Regardless of what actually transpired at Michigan State last summer, it is not as if this is a repeat of the whole "Fab Five" scandal at Michigan, or all the wrongdoings done at Ohio State under then-head coach Jim O'Brien.

The best thing now for the conference, and especially for the Spartans, is for everyone to move on. Michigan State has a top 25 team in Texas visiting the Breslin Center this week before the Spartans begin Big Ten play on New Year's Eve against Minnesota. This is kind of a big game for Izzo's squad

considering how it has already lost games to the likes of Connecticut, Duke, and Syracuse, all of whom are ranked in the top 5 nationally by the AP as of Monday.

To let something like this secondary violation continue to linger is not going to be helpful to a team that has the potential Michigan State has this season. Not to mention this is not anything that could nor should smear Izzo's legacy at the school.

He will bounce back from this, the Spartans will bounce back from this, and the Big Ten will bounce back from this.

12/13/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 16 (premium)

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By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

Major news came from the Big Ten on Monday. First, the conference revealed its new logo that goes in effect next year once Nebraska is a member. Then it revealed the names of the two divisions that will be established in football beginning next season. Finally, the Big Ten compiled 18 new trophies that will be awarded at the end of the every football season, all of which are named after two iconic figures each.

The reaction from the public about all of this was underwhelming, to say the least. Right away, there was lambasting on various social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook over the logo and how it looked unoriginal.

Then came the biggest news of the day – the names of the two divisions.

Big Ten commissioner Jim Delany revealed the names “Legends” and “Leaders” as the names of the conference’s two football divisions. The Legends Division includes Iowa, Michigan, Michigan State, Minnesota, Nebraska and Northwestern, while the Leaders Division features Illinois, Indiana, Ohio State, Penn State, Purdue, and Wisconsin.

Simply put, the names caught many by surprise.

Delany stressed how because the divisions were not based on geography, the names weren’t going to be “East” and “West.” He also mentioned how there was never an intention to name these divisions after specific people. This was a reaction to rumors the past few months that the divisions might have been named after both Woody Hayes and Bo Schembechler.

But the names “Legends” and “Leaders.” It was not even a mixed review from the public. Overwhelmingly, many felt opposed to this. Fans from other conferences belittled the Big Ten for these names. Big Ten fans were left in a state of disbelief when these names were revealed.

One thing that might need to be realized is that as crazy as this sounds, and as bland as the logo may or may not look, they are things that over time will sink into the conscious of every fan.

No, really. They will.

It is kind of like when Comiskey Park in Chicago was re-named U.S. Cellular Field. There were many White Sox fans clamoring

how they would always refer to the ballpark as “Comiskey” no matter what. Now there are many who commonly refer to it as “The Cell.”

The logo will stick. The more everyone sees it on football fields and basketball courts all across Big Ten campuses, it is something that will eventually be engrained.

That all leads to the names of the new trophies. For instance, the winner of the Big Ten Championship Game wins the Stagg-Paterno Championship Trophy. That prize is named after legendary Big Ten coaches Amos Alonzo Stagg and Joe Paterno, with the latter still coaching today at Penn State.

The game’s MVP wins the Grange-Griffin Most Valuable Player Trophy, named after Illinois icon Harold “Red” Grange and two-time Ohio State Heisman winner Archie Griffin.

Seeing all these trophies hyphenated and having two names attached to each one might seem excessive, but like the logo and like the division names, it is now simply a matter of getting acquainted with because they will not go away anytime soon.

It will be interesting to see what the feelings are for all of this when next season arrives and everything is actually put to use. Once the logo is visible, once the divisions are written in the conference standings, once these trophies are actually handed out, things might be different.

Regardless, the one good thing is that all of this is now behind us and behind the conference, and now it can move forward on making next year as exciting as it sounds when Nebraska finally joins.

12/6/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 15 (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 Dec. 5, all 35 bowl match-ups were announced. This year, the Big Ten is sending eight teams – Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Michigan State, Northwestern, Ohio State, Penn State, and Wisconsin – to bowl games.

Even more impressive is that for the sixth consecutive season, the conference earned itself two BCS bowl bids as the fourth-ranked Badgers are in Pasadena, Calif., to play No. 3 TCU in the 2011 Rose Bowl on New Year's Day, while the sixth-ranked Buckeyes meet No. 8 Arkansas on Jan. 4 at the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans, La.

Since the BCS was established in 1998 to determine which two teams would meet for the national championship, the Big Ten has benefited more than any other conference. In 13 years, there have now been 57 BCS bowls, with the Big Ten being represented in 23 of those games, more than any other conference.

This season proved to be even more remarkable as an 11-1 Michigan State squad – which beat Wisconsin head-to-head, but did not play Ohio State and was ranked the lowest of the three teams in the final BCS standings – was sent to the Capital One Bowl in Orlando, Fla., to play defending national champion

Alabama.

The Big Ten can take pride in having three 11-1 teams this season. It can take pride in having eight of 11 teams qualify for bowls (not to mention soon-to-be newcomer Nebraska is playing in the Holiday Bowl). But one thing remains certain – for all the success the past year has provided the conference, it needs to represent well in these bowls in order to avoid backlash from other conferences, writers, and fans across the country.

None of these games appear easy for the Big Ten this year. Wisconsin plays an undefeated TCU squad in Pasadena that might have had a legitimate beef for playing in the BCS National Championship Game after going 12-0. Ohio State plays a red-hot Arkansas team with 10 wins that is led by a quarterback who once suited up for the Maize and Blue before transferring.

Speaking of Michigan, the pressure remains on head coach Rich Rodriguez, and the Wolverines will need to have a good showing in the Gator Bowl against No. 21 Mississippi State in order for him to possibly keep his job.

The Spartans playing the Crimson Tide in Orlando is not an easy task, even if Alabama has injuries to deal with. Not to mention the reunion of sorts for Alabama head coach Nick Saban, who coached in East Lansing for five seasons and once had current Spartan head coach Mark Dantonio as an assistant.

Penn State benefited from Iowa's late-season debacle and moved up to the Outback Bowl, but even though Florida had a rough 2010 season itself going an identical 7-5, the game being in Tampa definitely gives the Gators a bit of a home-field advantage.

Speaking of the Hawkeyes, they not only fell to the Insight Bowl, but Iowa also drew as an opponent a Missouri squad that went 10-2 and has a win under its belt over Big 12 champion Oklahoma.

Finally, there's both Illinois and Northwestern, both of whom are bowling in the same season for the first time ever as hard as that might be to believe. Both the Fighting Illini and Wildcats have trips to the Lone Star State against Big 12 opponents that call Texas home. Illinois heads to Houston on Dec. 29 to play in the Texas Bowl against Baylor, who is playing in its first bowl game of any kind in 16 seasons. Meanwhile, Northwestern was invited to the inaugural TicketCity Bowl in Dallas, where it faces Texas Tech.

Again, not one of these games looks to be an easy victory for the Big Ten this season, which is why it is all the more important for the conference to build off the success it had in bowls last year.

And should both Wisconsin and Ohio State win their respective BCS bowls in January, the Big Ten will definitely be heading in the right direction entering 2011, when Nebraska does join the conference.

One last note relating to the addition of the Cornhuskers – the Big Ten released a statement over the weekend stating it has no further plans on expanding. Things may change down the road, but this was an easy call to make, and the right one at that.

With 12 teams, two divisions, and a championship game now in place beginning next year, there's no need to worry about expansion for the time being. Nebraska joining next year is only going to boost the Big Ten in a positive direction now, and the conference is about to be as strong as it has ever been.

Which goes back to this bowl season ahead. A strong overall showing by the Big Ten is going to only benefit the conference down the line, and maybe allow it to continue this ongoing streak of multiple BCS appearances every season.

11/29/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 14 (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

At this time last year, the Big Ten was dealing with a national image problem in the world of college basketball. The Big Ten/ACC Challenge had been in existence for 10 years, with the ACC dominating every season.

It took 11 attempts, but the Big Ten finally got the upper-hand in 2009. The accomplishment gained the conference some real positive exposure on a national level, and this has led to the high expectations surrounding the Big Ten today.

To be quite honest, there is no reason the Big Ten should not be able to win this for the second year in a row.

This year's edition of the Big Ten/ACC Challenge begins tonight in Minneapolis, Minn., when the Minnesota Golden Gophers host the Virginia Cavaliers. With this game being at "The Barn," Minnesota should be able to handle business.

On Tuesday, there are five match-ups, three of which the Big Ten ought to be favored in. The key games for the conference will be Northwestern hosting a reeling Georgia Tech squad, Ohio State traveling to play a Florida State team it beat at

Value City Arena last year, and Illinois playing host to a North Carolina team that has already been beaten by Minnesota this season.

Other games on Tuesday include the Iowa Hawkeyes playing at Wake Forest, and Michigan playing Clemson two seasons after beating the Tigers in the NCAA Tournament.

Then on Dec. 1, there are five more games. Two contests where the Big Ten should be favored are Wisconsin playing at home against North Carolina State (this coming one season after beating Duke at the Kohl Center), and Purdue traveling to Blacksburg, Va., to play Virginia Tech. Rounding out this year's Challenge are Indiana playing at Boston College and Penn State playing host to an old rival from its pre-Big 10 days, Maryland.

Oh, and a game at Cameron Indoor Stadium in Durham, N.C., featuring defending national champion Duke and Michigan State, who was ranked second nationally before losing to Connecticut last week at the Maui Invitational, and has been a Final Four participant in each of the past two seasons.

The opportunity is right there for the picking as far as the Big Ten is concerned. It will be favored in at least six of these 11 games over the course of the next three days. There is no reason to think the Big Ten's run does not continue.

Here are the ramifications from a national perspective – better the ACC again this year, and no one will be disputing whether the Big Ten is the best conference in college hoops this season. Between the Golden Gophers' success in Puerto Rico earlier this month, the Badgers' run at the Old Spice Classic in Orlando, Fla., over Thanksgiving weekend, and the success of teams early on like Ohio State, this conference has plenty of fire power in 2010-11.

As stated before on this site and by numerous other outlets that follow the conference closely, there are six teams in the

Big Ten right now that appear to be locks for the 2011 NCAA Tournament in Ohio State, Michigan State, Illinois, Minnesota, Purdue, and Wisconsin. Barring major collapses in conference play by any of these six, the thought of one of these teams not dancing this March seems ridiculous.

Lose this year's Big Ten/ACC Challenge, however, and the same problems that existed before will rear their ugly heads once again. All the talk about the Big Ten being subpar to conferences like the ACC, the Big East, and the Big 12. This is what lies ahead if the conference struggles on the court over these next few days.

The bottom line is that in college sports, perception is reality, whether people like it or not. If a conference is perceived to be bad or at least not good – which is exactly what some thought of the Big Ten as recently as two years ago – the stigma sticks, even if the statement being made is exaggerated. The conference has dealt with the same problems on the gridiron as well in recent years.

Again, this week has potential for the Big Ten to make a giant statement to the Dick Vitales of the world. Show again on the hardwood that it is better than the ACC, and the praise for the Big Ten will continue throughout the season until no one from the conference remains in the NCAA Tournament.

Really, it is that simple.

11/22/2010: State of the Big

Ten, Volume 13 (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

The Big Ten enters the last week of conference play in this 2010 football season, and now three teams remain.

After Wisconsin, Michigan State, and Ohio State all won last weekend, all three have 10-1 overall records, all three have 6-1 Big Ten records, and all three can win a share of the Big Ten crown with victories on Nov. 27.

This is significant in two ways. On one hand, if this three-way tie for the Big Ten crown comes to fruition, the conference will likely cement itself a second BCS bid, meaning everyone who is bowl-eligible (there are eight and only eight teams) moves up the bowl pecking order when the games are announced on Dec. 5.

On the other hand, it means that there is going to be an 11-1 Big Ten team that ends up having to settle for a bid in the Capital One Bowl.

Instead of arguing the merits of whoever wins the Big East or ACC against a team like Michigan State, who many have pegged for Orlando instead of a BCS game in this scenario, let's look at this from the perspective of the Big Ten's future.

This is why a 12th team was needed. This is why a conference championship game is needed.

The beauty of having a Big Ten championship game next year and beyond is that there will always be one conference champion, period. Now there could be a situation inside divisions where three teams all beat each other and it comes down to the BCS standings like it did in the Big 12 South division two years ago.

But even if that does happen, this is why competitive balance was such a huge priority for commissioner Jim Delany when the Big Ten established these two divisions that as of now remain unnamed.

The biggest shame here is that Michigan State and Ohio State did not play each other, and head-to-head cannot be entirely taken into account. This is where the divisions come into play.

If one team does not play another because they are in different divisions, then they will eventually meet in the championship game. So something like this would not occur.

Now if they were in effect this year, Wisconsin's head-to-head over Ohio State as of now would place the Badgers against the Spartans, who are slated to be in the other division. Michigan State won the head-to-head with Wisconsin back in East Lansing, Mich., on Oct. 2.

But back to the present matter. Right now, Wisconsin is seventh in the BCS standings, Ohio State eighth and Michigan State is 10th. If the three-way tie happens and there is no change in this positioning, then the Badgers would be the ones heading to Pasadena, Calif., to play in the 2011 Rose Bowl. Wisconsin plays a 2:30 p.m. contest at Camp Randall Stadium in Madison, Wis., against Northwestern.

The Buckeyes are likely to lock up yet another BCS bid with a win at home on Nov. 27 against their hated rival, Michigan, who comes to "The Horseshoe" with a 7-4 overall mark.

That leaves the Spartans possibly on the outside looking in, despite the win over the Badgers last month. Michigan State has the most daunting task of the three teams this weekend, traveling to State College, Pa., to play Penn State. If there is a sliver of good news for the Spartans, however, it's this: A win at Penn State, coupled with an Ohio State loss to Michigan, would lock up the Rose Bowl bid for Michigan State before Wisconsin even takes the field to play the Wildcats.

However, should the Nittany Lions upset the Spartans, it would be the Badgers clinching a Rose Bowl berth with a win, thanks to their head-to-head victory over the Buckeyes on Oct. 16 in Madison.

Regardless of how this all plays out, it has been real fascinating to see unfold, especially when one considers this is the last time there will ever be teams sharing a Big Ten championship.