

# 3/31/2014: State of the Big Ten, Volume 126 (premium)

*Every Monday, we will be running a weekly series titled "State of the Big Ten," which will be made available to all members of HawkeyeDrive.com. This series of columns will focus on one major headline regarding the conference and go in-depth on the subject at hand.*

By Brendan Stiles

*HawkeyeDrive.com*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## **3/26/2014: Iowa spring football notebook**



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the start of the Hawkeyes' 2014 spring football period during a press conference held Wednesday, March 26, 2014, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

By Brendan Stiles

*HawkeyeDrive.com*

IOWA CITY, Iowa – If an overriding theme resides with Iowa football as it opens its spring football period Wednesday, it would be stability.

Stability appears rampant on numerous fronts, from the coaching staff in place to the players in place. On the coaching front, Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz spent the last two springs trying to get new assistants acclimated to the players in place and vice versa. He enters this spring having his staff from a year ago fully intact with every position group.

“It’s nice when the players get here and they know ... what they heard and what they saw is going to be in place throughout their entire career,” Ferentz said during his first media availability of the spring Wednesday. “Philosophically, I don’t think we’re looking for our identity. We have a good idea of who we are and what we want to do.”

It also exists in his players, as evident by the 2-deep put out Wednesday afternoon prior to the Hawkeyes’ first spring practice.

With the exception of a linebacking corps that lost three senior starters, experience reigns supreme among position groups. Whether it’s the entire offensive backfield, the receiving corps, the tight ends, either line or the secondary, there’s some level of stability in place in each spot.

Which is just how Ferentz likes it.

“The good news is we have an opportunity,” Ferentz said. “I think it has been that way most years since I’ve been here, we’ve had an opportunity to be a good football team. But the important thing for our players is to understand that we’ve got a lot of work to do. There’s nothing we can assume.”

**So about those linebackers...**

Ferentz was asked quite a bit Wednesday about having to replace the trio of James Morris, Christian Kirksey and Anthony Hitchens, and for good reason. The last few instances where major overhaul occurred within the Iowa linebacking corps, seasons of disappointment ensued, whether it was replacing Chad Greenway and Abdul Hodge before a 6-7 2006 campaign or replacing Pat Angerer and A.J. Edds before an 8-5 2010 season where much higher expectations were in place.

If there's one positive the Hawkeyes have going for them though in terms of replacing three seniors that were the heart and soul of that defense, it's that the three likely replacements all possess some type of playing experience.

Senior Quinton Alston, junior Travis Perry and sophomore Reggie Spearman all saw the field at various points in 2013. Alston and Spearman both saw playing time increase late last season when Iowa began incorporating its Raider package on third down (Alston was the fourth linebacker, while Spearman lined up at defensive end). Perry also saw the field last season playing special teams and before that saw reps with the first-team defense late in 2012 during a 13-7 loss to Nebraska in the regular season finale.

"The biggest thing, especially in the initial stages, is to encourage guys to be aggressive. Not be afraid to make a mistake," Ferentz said. "It's not a crisis situation if somebody blows an assignment or a coverage at this point in the year."

### **Lomax switching to free safety**

The most notable change within Iowa's spring 2-deep was in the secondary, where junior Jordan Lomax was listed as the first-string free safety, replacing the outgoing Tanner Miller. Lomax began last season as a first-string cornerback, only to get injured in the season opener against Northern Illinois and then witness a then-true freshman in Desmond King take his

spot for good.

Ferentz said what prompted him to make this move with Lomax was noticing traits in his game and how they can apply to both the corner and safety positions.

“He’s a physical player, he’s very intelligent, he has been a honor student since he has been here and communicative that way,” Ferentz said. “We worked with him last year in that position, seemed like he took to it pretty naturally.

“It seems like right now, he’s the best person for that job.”

This won’t be the first time Ferentz has tinkered with his secondary during spring ball. In fact, the move Lomax is making is the exact same position change Iowa experimented with in 2011 with Micah Hyde. At that time, the move was considered to be permanent. But on-field issues at the corner positions resulted in Hyde moving back to corner after only two games and Miller taking over at free safety.

For the time being at least, Ferentz would like to think this move with Lomax will remain permanent.

As for the rest of the secondary, King remains listed as a starter at the corner he took from Lomax last season and Lowdermilk remains first-string at the strong safety spot. The other corner position is currently a two-way battle between sophomore Maurice Fleming (who moved over from wide receiver during his redshirt year in 2012) and junior Sean Draper, who saw limited action early last season when the Hawkeyes used their nickel package on third down.

“I think we have guys at the corner position that look like they’re going to have a chance to develop,” Ferentz said. “One thing affects the other, there’s no doubt about that.”

### **Assembling the offensive line**

Although the Hawkeyes are in need of replacing a pair of

starters up front, three starters from last season are back, including a guy in Brandon Scherff that Ferentz called “the team’s MVP” in 2013.

It was expected that senior Andrew Donnal would be first-string entering this spring given the amount of playing experience he had garnered rotating at various positions across the offensive line. On Wednesday, Ferentz made clear he wanted to see how Donnal would look filling Brett Van Sloten’s void at right tackle.

Donnal primarily was used in a rotation alongside Jordan Walsh at right guard last season. Before that was established though, there was a time he was listed behind Scherff at left tackle.

“Andrew is a player that we think is better suited to play tackle and he did a good job at guard,” Ferentz said. “We have all the confidence in the world he’ll play well for us and I don’t think he’s overwhelmed at all. He’s excited about it and I think he’s totally comfortable out in that position.”

As for the left guard spot, Ferentz said it’s “wide open.” Redshirt freshman Sean Welsh enters the spring listed first-string with Ryan Ward – who looked to be Van Sloten’s replacement at right tackle – listed behind him.

“He made the assimilation pretty ... I don’t want to say effortlessly, but he picked things up quickly and did a lot of good things,” Ferentz said. “He’s a guy in contention.”

### **Open practice tidbits**

For the second straight spring, Iowa will conduct two events open to the public during its spring football period. The first will be the Hawkeyes’ return to West Des Moines Valley High School for an open practice scheduled for April 12 at Valley Stadium. Like last year, tickets will be on sale beginning April 1 around various Central and Western Iowa Hy-

Vees, according to a release sent out by the UI Wednesday.

In that same release, it also states a limited number of tickets will be available that same date at both the Herky's Locker Room inside West Des Moines' Valley West Mall and at the UI Athletics Ticket Office inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

The second event is the more traditional final spring practice at Kinnick Stadium, scheduled for April 26. Once again, this event will be more of a spring game, with the scoring system implemented by the Hawkeyes during their final spring practice last year.

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## **3/26/2014: Kirk Ferentz press conference transcript**

By Brendan Stiles

*HawkeyeDrive.com*

Below is a PDF from the Iowa sports information department featuring the complete transcript from Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz's spring football press conference on Wednesday in Iowa City:

[COACH FERENTZ – 3 26 14](#)

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# 2014 Iowa spring football 2-deep

## OFFENSE:

WR 4 Smith, 18 Willies

LT 68 Scherff, 52 Myers

LG 79 Welsh, 73 Ward

C 63 Blythe, 57 Gaul

RG 65 Walsh, 58 Simmons

RT 78 Donnal, 64 Croston

TE , 82 Hamilton, 87 Duzey

WR 11 Martin-Manley, 89 VandeBerg

WR 17 Hillyer, 22 Powell

QB 15 Rudock, 16 Beathard

RB Weisman/33 Canzeri, 5 Bullock/29 Daniels, Jr.

FB 38 Cox, 42 Plewa

## DEFENSE:

DE 95 Ott, 34 Meier

DT 71 Davis, 97 Cooper

DT 90 Trinca-Pasat, 67 Johnson/56 Ekakitie

DE 98 Hardy, 94 McMinn

OLB 39 Perry. 36 Fisher

MLB 52 Alston, 47 Kenny/46 Gilson

WLB 6 Spearman, 36 Fisher/43 Jewell

LCB 28 Fleming/7 Draper, 13 Mabin

SS 37 Lowdermilk, 21 Law

FS 27 Lomax, 12 Gair

RCB 14 King, 2 Rucker

**SPECIAL TEAMS:**

P 98 Kornbrath, 16 Kidd

PK 1 Koehn, 93 Haffer

LS 97 Kluver

PR 11 Martin-Manley

KR 33 Canzeri

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## **3/24/2014: State of the Big Ten, Volume 125 (premium)**

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While this season isn't quite over yet with three Big Ten teams still playing in the NCAA Tournament, one thing has become clear over the past week regarding the conference's future. The drop-off between the past few years and the upcoming 2014-15 season will be quite evident.

Now that's not to say there won't be good teams. With the exception of losing Ben Brust, Wisconsin will bring back everyone else of importance and could be a preseason top 5 team come November. There's also a team like Illinois that should be able to use its recent NIT run as a springboard into 2014-15.

But the drop-off will be noticeable, mainly because of the players leaving or potentially leaving once this season ends. Indiana is the most obvious Exhibit A after what transpired Monday in Bloomington with three players being released from scholarships – and this is after Noah Vonleh declared he would leave for the NBA after a freshman season where he led the Big Ten in rebounding.

Ohio State loses Aaron Craft, but the Buckeyes have also seen Amadeo Della Valle opt to leave early so he can play professionally overseas and they are reportedly losing LaQuinton Ross early to the NBA. Michigan State is probably losing Gary Harris on top of Adreian Payne graduating and who knows what will happen at Michigan over the coming weeks with players like Nik Stauskas, Glenn Robinson III and Mitch McGary.

Just from a talent perspective, there's going to be a decline and that's with the Big Ten adding both Maryland and Rutgers next season (although Rutgers isn't likely to bring much to the table right away in terms of talent). It's just a reality.

Last year was the best the conference had been in 20-plus years. This year has been the deepest the Big Ten has been in recent memory. Next year won't compare to either. It just

won't.

A lot still has to happen over the next couple of months before any finalities can be made about individual teams. More players are going to transfer and some might even transfer in to some of these teams. But collectively speaking, there's a lot going away once this season ends two weeks from now in Arlington, Texas.

Two types of teams are best equipped for the short-term. One type is a team like Wisconsin or Michigan who boded well this year and will potentially return quite a bit next year. The other type is the team building off transfers. This is how Nebraska made the NCAA Tournament in two years under Tim Miles and how a team like Illinois (maybe Indiana depending on who comes in) will likely return to the dance in 2015.

The ones that stand pat – or at least appear to be standing pat – are the ones that decline. This is how Purdue has fallen and how Ohio State had as poor a year as it has had under Thad Matta.

If there's good news for some of these programs, it's that they have time to adjust their rosters accordingly. Otherwise, the middle of the pack is going to be loaded and will result in teams faring worse than expected.

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## **3/17/2014: State of the Big Ten, Volume 124 (premium)**

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**major headline regarding the conference and go in-depth on the subject at hand.**

By Brendan Stiles

*HawkeyeDrive.com*

Selection Sunday came and went, and in total, the Big Ten has nine teams playing in some type of postseason this March.

There are the obvious six teams that made the NCAA Tournament (including an Iowa squad that has to play in the First Four on March 19 in Dayton), two NIT teams (Illinois and Minnesota) and then there's Penn State accepting an invitation to play in the CBI. Penn State is following in the footsteps of Purdue, who was the first Big Ten team to play in the CBI last season.

Then there's Indiana.

The Hoosiers were confident that despite finishing 17-15 and exiting the Big Ten Tournament with a first round loss to Illinois last week, they would still receive an NIT invitation. Except there was one problem – a lot of first place teams from smaller one-bid conferences weren't winning in their conference tourneys, which automatically puts them in the NIT.

In total, there were 13 such teams that wound up receiving automatic NIT bids and there were only 32 spots in the tourney altogether. While Illinois and Minnesota got in, Indiana wasn't as fortunate.

Indiana athletics director Fred Glass was quoted as saying, "We're Indiana," when asked why the Hoosiers didn't accept a CBI invite like Penn State did.

One might argue the Hoosiers sound self-entitled in holding this stance. But the reality is Glass is right about this (even though the irony of Indiana turning down an extra home game after what happened to Assembly Hall last month is

somewhat amusing). A school like Indiana has no business playing in a tournament like the CBI, nor should it.

What has to be kept in mind is unlike the NCAA and NIT tournaments (where the NCAA facilitates the process), the CBI places everything on the schools that participate. For instance, when Purdue played in the CBI last year, it was responsible for selling all of its tickets and was basically buying the opportunity to play a few extra games inside Mackey Arena.

To be quite honest, it was shocking to see the Boilermakers even play in that tourney and it's somewhat shocking to see Penn State in it this year (although playing in this does give the Nittany Lions something to build off of next season). Thinking that Indiana is the only Big Ten school that would stick its nose up at the CBI would be naive.

In fact, it's not even the first Big Ten school to do so. Two years ago, there was uncertainty whether or not Iowa would play in any sort of postseason and debate raged about whether the Hawkeyes should play in the CBI. At that time, Iowa athletics director Gary Barta made clear he wouldn't agree to it. As it turned out, the Hawkeyes got fortunate and received a NIT berth (and even got a home game against Dayton despite being the lower seed).

The other thing to consider is while a team like Penn State is playing in some type of postseason for the first time under Pat Chambers, Indiana was a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament just last season. The Hoosiers obviously weren't considered to be anything similar this year, but going 17-15 after winning the Big Ten a year ago is a disappointment, especially for a program such as Indiana.

So yeah, there's no reason to blame Glass or Indiana for making the decision it made. Not to mention they should all probably be putting their attention towards the renovations

taking place there and ensuring another piece of metal doesn't fall from the ceiling again.

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# Pair of Hawkeye football players to transfer

By Brendan Stiles

*HawkeyeDrive.com*

Senior quarterback Cody Sokol and and sophomore-to-be defensive back Ruben Lile have both been granted releases from their scholarships and will transfer, Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz confirmed in a statement released by the UI on Monday. Sokol's departure [was first reported by Tom Kakert and Blair Sanderson of HawkeyeReport.com.](#)

Sokol will transfer to Louisiana Tech, where he will be immediately eligible for one more season. He originally transferred to Iowa before the 2012 season after playing two seasons at Scottsdale Community College.

Sokol was part of a three-way competition last off-season for the starting quarterback job, which was won by Jake Rudock. He then got demoted to third-string behind C.J. Beathard and appeared in mop-up duty of the Hawkeyes' 38-17 win at Nebraska on Nov. 29.

Lile redshirted in 2012 after suffering a season-ending knee injury during fall camp. Last season, he appeared in three games during the month of September and recorded one tackle, which came in Iowa's 27-21 win at Iowa State on Sept. 14.

"Ruben expressed a desire to transfer closer to home and we

will do all we can to help him with his request," Ferentz said. Lile is a native of Detroit.

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# Hawkeyes to return to West Des Moines

By Brendan Stiles

*HawkeyeDrive.com*

The Iowa football program revealed details Friday confirming what head coach Kirk Ferentz previously stated about having another open spring practice at Valley Stadium in West Des Moines this spring.

The open practice is scheduled for April 12 and will start at 1 p.m. Central that afternoon. This will be the second year in a row Iowa has done this after holding a spring practice outside Iowa City for the first time last April.

According to a release sent out by the UI Friday, gates at Valley Stadium are scheduled to open that morning around 11:30 a.m. CT and details about how fans in Central Iowa can obtain tickets are expected to be announced sometime next week. Fans aren't going to be allowed to tailgate on the Valley Stadium premises beforehand.

Iowa starts its spring football period March 26 and in addition to this open practice in West Des Moines, the Hawkeyes will continue holding their annual open practice inside Kinnick Stadium at the very end of the period, which is April 26. The open practice that afternoon in Iowa City is scheduled to start at 2 p.m. CT.



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By Brendan Stiles

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There was quite a stir in Big Ten country over the past week when there were rumors surfacing about the league contemplating a move where football games would be played on Fridays. Big Ten commissioner Jim Delany squashed those rumors recently by saying scheduling Friday Big Ten games isn't going to become a norm anytime soon (if ever).

But it wasn't the rumors itself that were fascinating. After all, there are other conferences like the ACC and Pac-12 that have no issue playing games on Fridays. What was fascinating was seeing how vehemently opposed fans of all 12 (soon to be 14) schools were to the idea even being proposed in the first place.

Right now, there is one Big Ten football game played on a day other than Saturday and that's when Iowa and Nebraska meet annually on Black Friday. Seeing how that's technically considered a holiday (or at least it falls on a holiday weekend anyway), this obviously won't be done away with. But the discussions weren't so much about that as they were, say, having a Friday night game in October between Purdue and Penn

State.

This is what made fans lash out at the idea of games being played on any other day besides Saturday. The other argument that was made was hearing those who said Fridays should be reserved for high-school football. Perhaps they should be, but that's not keeping other aforementioned leagues from scheduling Friday games themselves. They look at it as an opportunity to gain a national audience.

In principle, the Big Ten is probably wise sticking to Saturdays. At the very least, it's sticking to its constituencies. But as mentioned before in this column long ago, the idea of weekday games is something that's only going to get brought up again and again until it happens and that's regardless of what fans think.

The reality is this – money is at the epicenter of decisions such as this. The Big Ten has its own network that could carry a Friday night game should the conference so choose to schedule one. This is the direction other conferences following the Big Ten's lead on creating its own channels are going to do.

What's keeping the Pac-12 Networks from one day having a Friday night game between Oregon State and Colorado? What's keeping the SEC from having a Friday night game between Kentucky and Ole Miss on its new network? The answers to those questions won't seem as obvious 5-10 years from now if those networks flourish like BTN has.

Think about it. If the Big Ten really wanted, that Purdue-Penn State game in October could be scheduled for a Friday night if the conference wanted that platform to lure in new viewers. Again, it probably won't happen anytime soon. But who's to say it won't someday be done.

Sure, fans might not like it. But it's not as though fans and their tailgating priorities are being placed front and center

on schools' agendas to begin with. The media would probably hate it because that would mean tighter deadlines that particular week. But no one really cares how it impacts reporters.

If a profit can be made, an investment will someday happen and quite honestly, the Big Ten might need to consider giving this further thought if for no other reason than it allows the conference to keep up with the joneses. Games in prime time (no matter what day of the week) are going to be of benefit to college football programs and the Big Ten and its members are no exception.

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## **2/24/2014: State of the Big Ten, Volume 121 (premium)**

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By Brendan Stiles

*HawkeyeDrive.com*

Normally, getting personal and using first-person references is something that is usually avoided in this weekly column. But in light of what happened in Bloomington, Ind., last week and the direct impact it has had on HawkeyeDrive.com, this week's edition will be an exception.

As you know by now, No. 20 Iowa had its game at Indiana

postponed last week due to a 50-pound piece of metal falling from the ceiling of Assembly Hall and damaging seats. The game is being made up Feb. 27 in that very building. Unfortunately, I won't be making the return trip to Bloomington to cover it.

I'm bringing this up for two reasons: First, I want to make clear that this isn't an issue with access. I was in Bloomington last week and checked into my hotel minutes before an announcement was made. In fact, after an announcement was made, I made the decision to stick around – since my room had already been paid for – and cover the press conference that happened there explaining what occurred. If I wanted to make the trip and cover the make-up game this week, I could without issue. But this is one time I'm electing to cover from home. It was a decision I was reluctant to make this week, but one that needed to be made.

(I guess now's also a good time to make clear to everyone here I will still be in Minneapolis covering Tuesday's game between Iowa and Minnesota for this site and plan to make all remaining trips going forward sans Thursday.)

The other reason I'm bringing this up here is because it leads to a bigger issue I believe when it comes to the conference. This game could've been made up last week and had it been (in Bloomington or Indianapolis), I would've been there covering it. Like the Hawkeyes, I was already there in the Hoosier State. Having to attempt going to Bloomington after going to Minneapolis here within the next 24 hours just didn't make logistical sense, especially since I was just in Bloomington.

Before Iowa's game against Wisconsin over the weekend, I was talking with one of my sources who had an interesting idea that I want to share here because I not only think he was onto something, but I really think the Big Ten needs to give this some thought during the off-season.

His idea was this: That every league game have a contingency

plan in case a game gets postponed like the Iowa-Indiana game last week did so it can be made up right away.

Now this doesn't seem realistic for two reasons. One is the role of television in the decision-making process. The other is whether nearby venues can be used. Places near pro markets might have trouble because venues in places like Chicago, Indianapolis, Detroit, Milwaukee, etc., have current tenants that aren't going to re-schedule around a college basketball game.

But the fact that the Indiana Pacers offered both teams to make the game up the following day in Indianapolis and that it didn't happen remains mind-boggling. I understand why Indiana wanted to do what was necessary to have a game at Assembly Hall, but if safety was that much of an issue, then why try to play a game in a place where something hazardous just occurred.

Thankfully, the incident happened before any fans were let inside. But what if it didn't? What if that piece of metal fell hours later before or during the game and injured or even killed the fans sitting in that area? Then there's absolutely no way Indiana would've been able to play another game there this season.

Again, the idea of being able to make up games almost immediately might not totally work on the surface, but it ought to at least be discussed. When Maryland and Rutgers both join the conference next season, scheduling is only going to become more complicated and more games are going to feature single-plays.

There are a lot of thoughts on this matter that I have, but I've said enough. The main thing here was to inform all of you who are subscribers to this site what my intentions are travel-wise for the rest of the season. I hope you understand where I'm coming from in the decision I had to make here about

not going to Bloomington a second time.