



Football at Ohio State is never boring, but in contrast to the last couple of years, the offseason talk has been focused on football, as opposed to tattoos, NCAA investigations, coaching searches and bowl bans. In fact, it says something about how uneventful spring football was for Urban Meyer and his Ohio State Buckeyes that one of the biggest pieces of news of the season in Columbus is the realignment of the Big Ten Conference. After one swan song season here in 2013, it's goodbye Legends...so long Leaders. There will be no formal Farewell Tour.

The New Big Ten



The Big Ten office [announced](#) recently that they are scrapping those much derided division names in favor of East and West, and will be realigning their member teams accordingly. The renamed division format will be effective when new members Maryland and Rutgers join the conference for the 2014 season, and a new nine-game conference schedule will commence in 2016.

The East

Joining current Leaders members Ohio State, Penn State and Indiana in the new East Division will be Michigan, Michigan State and the two new additions from the east....Maryland and Rutgers. The concentration in one division of the three traditional football powers in the conference - OSU, Michigan and Penn State - certainly gives the appearance of a competitive imbalance in football at the outset. It may turn out that way in the short term, but it's hardly a no-brainer.

Michigan is just now coming out of a down cycle, and Penn State is arguably heading into one. None of these three power teams has made an appearance in either of the first two Big Ten championship games, for a variety of reasons. And only the Buckeyes, who are coming off a speed bump of their own, could be considered capable of dominating this league. I argued a year ago that, despite a BCS bowl game season in 2011, [Michigan will be "back"](#) when they win, at the very least, a division title. If there's a sleeper to be noted in this group, you might look at Rutgers, a program that has been quietly [out-recruiting](#) many of its future Big Ten East rivals.

The West

Nebraska, Wisconsin and Northwestern will probably still be the best teams in the West when they get rolling out there in the Central time zone in 2014. Illinois, Iowa, Purdue and Minnesota should assume the role of challengers, unless one or more of those programs takes a quantum leap this fall.

At first glance, you can see why most observers are calling the East...warts and all...the stronger of the divisions. Wisconsin is in a coaching transition. Northwestern still has to beat some of the league's top programs to prove they are something besides your father's Northwestern. And until Nebraska gets back to playing defense, they'll have their own set of question marks. And the other four teams....well, make that at second glance too.

So What?

The most important consequence of the new alignment for OSU fans is that The Game will be unaffected by the changes in scheduling and division makeup. With OSU and Michigan playing in the same division, there will not have to be a “rivalry game” exception to the rotation of teams from the other division off of the schedule. When the new nine-game Big Ten slate begins in three years, each team will play the other six teams in their own division, and a rotating three teams from the other division.

The possibility that the importance of OSU-Michigan in November could be diluted by the prospect of the two teams having to play a rematch one week later in the Big Ten championship is a concern no more. More likely now is that OSU-Michigan will be contested for a berth in the title game more often than not. If it's possible (and not sacrilegious to suggest), that could make it even more important than it has been for the first 116 years of the rivalry.

Whatever else may be said about the new alignment, if [recent recruiting trends](#) are a predictor of success, the two best teams in the conference will be playing in the East, and we could be entering another era of the Big Two and the Little Eight (Plus Four)

Class of 2014



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