

The Season That Will Be: Big Ten Preview

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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After several seasons of decline the Big Ten is back on the upswing, bolstered by a solid 2009-10 bowl season and the anticipation of Nebraska joining the conference for 2011. But there will be plenty of excitement to tide us over while we're waiting for the Cornhuskers and a conference championship game at Lucas Oil Stadium. The Big Ten rolls into 2010 with a revamped bowl lineup, as many as three serious BCS contenders and perhaps the conference's best hope for a National Champion since Troy Smith and Co. dominated the '06 regular season.

On to the Preview:

Offensive Player of the Year- Terrelle Pryor, Ohio State: The prodigiously talented Pryor stepped up his game in 2009 after the disastrous performance against Purdue, completing 57.3 percent of his attempts, throwing eight touchdown passes to three interceptions, averaging 5.4 yards per carry with three rushing scores and leading the Buckeyes to six straight wins to end the season, including three over ranked opponents. He capped his comeback campaign by personally outgaining Oregon 338-260 in Ohio State's Rose Bowl conquest of the Ducks. Consistency is all the youngster needs now, and this should be the season in which he finally finds it.

Defensive Player of the Year- Ryan Kerrigan, Purdue: In a league loaded with superb defensive ends, Ryan Kerrigan might have been the best of the lot in 2009. He'll carry the

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Purdue stop troops again in 2010 and this time he'll be rewarded with the hardware for being the Big Ten's most outstanding defender. Hopefully he won't terrorize the Buckeyes in Columbus this season the way he did in West Lafayette last season, racking up three sacks in the Boilermaker upset.

Coach of the Year- Jim Tressel, Ohio State: It might just take an undefeated season to do it, but the Susan Lucci of Big Ten coaches will finally reel in his first conference COY honor, an addition to the ten *national* coach-of-the-year awards he's already won. Then again, how much can Big Ten COY really be worth if John L. Smith and Ron Zook have won it?

Order of Finish and Bowl Bids

Ohio State (BCS Championship): It's been a number of years since the Buckeyes came into a season this loaded on both sides of the football. Four starting offensive linemen, the starting quarterback, three top rushers, three top receivers, and most of a dominant defense are back from last season's 11-2 Rose Bowl Champion, and the expectations are nothing short of the program's fourth trip to the BCS Championship Game under Jim Tressel. With Miami of Florida making the trip to the Shoe along with Penn State and Michigan the schedule is inviting; only Wisconsin and Iowa pose serious road challenges. If Terrelle Pryor finds the consistency that has eluded him his first two seasons, this team will be playing in Glendale on January 10th

Wisconsin (Rose): The Badgers bounced back strongly from a mediocre 2008, going 10-3 and defeating Miami of Florida in the Champs Sports Bowl. They'll be expected to build on 2009's success with a stacked cast returning, including breakout quarterback Scott Tolzien, reigning Big Ten Offensive Player of the Year John Clay, top receiver Nick Toon, a veteran offensive line and a defense experienced in the back seven. Tough trips to East Lansing and Iowa City loom on the Big Ten docket but Ohio State comes to Madison and Penn State, which beat the Badgers by a combined 86-14 in 2007-08, is not on the slate. The October 16th

showdown with the Buckeyes could mean the difference between a rainy New Year's Day in central Florida and a slot in the BCS- but a loss shouldn't prevent Wisconsin from going to Pasadena as long as the Buckeyes cooperate and get all the way to the title game.

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Iowa (Capitol One): Despite a siege of injuries at running back and an up-and-down season by quarterback Ricky Stanzi, the Hawkeyes rode a string of seat-of-the-pants victories to an 11-2 season and their first major-bowl win since 1959. Stanzi returns along with his two top receivers Marvin McNutt and Derrell Johnson-Koulianos. The offensive line needs rebuilt but if Adam Robinson builds on his 834-yard freshman season the Hawkeyes should improve on their dismal rushing performance from 2009, when they were 99th in the nation on the ground. The defense, stiffened by end Adrian Clayborn and playmaking safety Tyler Sash, will again be excellent even without departed linebacker Pat Angerer. What's more, Iowa gets Ohio State, Penn State and Wisconsin at home. The ball might not bounce as favorably as it did for the Hawkeyes in 2009, but there's plenty enough on the roster and on the schedule for nine or ten wins.

Michigan State (Outback): There is progression in East Lansing under Mark Dantonio- back-to-back wins over Michigan for the first time since 1966-67, three straight bowl appearances for the first time since 1995-97; and there is regression- a 6-7 record last season and losses in all three of those bowls. With quarterback Kirk Cousins leading the offense and linebacker *extraordinaire* Greg Jones leading the defense the Spartans have a chance to progress in every way this season. But they've got to start closing out games- something that has been a problem for a long time up Sparty way. Michigan State is just 6-12 under Dantonio in games decided by eight points or less.

Penn State (Gator): I see a tough season in store for the Lions. Oh, they'll still be good, with Evan Royster, a solid receiving corps and an excellent secondary- but they won't be a major contender for the Big Ten championship. The main reason is the schedule. It's downright nasty, with road games at Alabama, at Iowa and at Ohio State. Yes, there is the creampuffs- Youngstown State, Kent State- but no other team in the country has to face both BCS title-game favorites on the road. That'll be a tall order for the Lions, and they're not up to it.

Purdue (Insight): The Boilermakers will have a tough time running the ball without the injured Ralph Bolden and they'll have to replace departed quarterback Joey Elliott, but Keith Smith (91 catches, 1,100 yards in 2009) is as good as any receiver in the conference and the defense should be reasonably stout behind the monstrous Ryan Kerrigan. Purdue won four of its last six in 2009- including the upset of Ohio State- and should improve to bowl-eligibility in 2010, especially if Miami transfer Robert Marve can pick up where the 3,026-yard-passing Elliott left off.

Michigan (Texas): No Big Ten coach- no coach in the country, perhaps- is on as heat a seat as Rich Rodriguez. The much-maligned RichRod is 8-16 in two seasons in Ann Arbor, has posted

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Michigan's only two losing seasons since before Bo Schembechler's arrival in 1969- and people are fed up. Six wins and a bowl berth won't be enough to keep the wolves at bay. Major improvement is needed, and it's needed this season. Unfortunately, major improvement doesn't look to be in the offing. Playmakers are in short supply on both sides of the ball and there's a good chance RichRod will have his third opening-day starting quarterback in three seasons in sophomore Denard Robinson. The Wolverines could sneak into a December bowl game- but by then they might have an interim coach, with a new boss (Jim Harbaugh?) waiting in the wings.

(Harbaugh would be the perfect choice to succeed RichRod, and thus the last choice a Buckeye fan should want. Contrary to what many believe the Big Ten doesn't need a strong Michigan team to be a good conference. Ohio State, Nebraska and Penn State are flagships enough and Iowa, Wisconsin and perhaps Michigan State form ample depth. Hey, I enjoy Ohio State beating Michigan every season-and that milk run will get bumpy with Harbaugh taking the controls. He would attack the Game with the same zest that has marked every stop on his career as a player and coach. I don't care how thin the Wolverines might be talent-wise- if the Buckeyes are facing a Harbaugh-coached squad in Ann Arbor in 2011, they're going to have a fight on their hands. He'd make this rivalry very interesting again- and I, for one, am comfortable with the boring rote recital of dominance Ohio State has enjoyed over TSUN the last decade.)

Northwestern (Dallas Football Classic): In the last two seasons the Wildcats have come oh-so-close to getting their first bowl win since 1949, only to fall short. This season, with Mike Kafka and Corey Wooten off to the pros, they might slip a little bit- but that might not be such a bad thing. With a soft non-conference schedule and no Ohio State a bowl trip should be almost assured, and if that bowl is the new Dallas Football Classic against- likely- a Conference USA opponent, Northwestern might just get that postseason win it has been looking for since the Truman Administration.

No Bowl Invite

Minnesota: Entering his fourth season in the Twin Cities, Tim Brewster is 14-24 with a 6-18 Big Ten record and has managed only two Insight Bowl losses in postseason play. Glen Mason got fired for results that were considerably better. The Gophers have the new stadium, new expectations have been built with it- and Brewster will have to glean some improved results out of 2010 or his position will become as slippery as a January sidewalk in Minneapolis. Unfortunately, a troubling schedule awaits the Gophers: Southern California visits TCF Bank in September, a road trip to Middle Tennessee could be very troublesome- and with Indiana off the schedule two out-of-conference losses will doom this team's bowl chances. Even a 3-1 OOC record might not be enough with Wisconsin, Penn State, Ohio State, Michigan State and Iowa

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waiting in the wings.

Illinois: Ron Zook couldn't win with a veteran team in 2009 and he won't win with a veteran team in 2010. The Zooker's career arc in Champaign is starting to resemble that of his predecessor Ron Turner- a horrible start followed by a quick, brief rise and a downward slide back into the Big Ten netherworld. A losing season would make it five out of six seasons the Illini have finished under .500 under Zook, who lugs a 21-39 Illinois coaching record into 2010.

Indiana: The Hoosiers started out 3-0 in 2009 before losing eight of their last nine. They were competitive at times, leading Iowa and Northwestern in the fourth quarter and losing by three to Wisconsin, but at the end of the day Bill Lynch's troops simply found ways to lose, because that's what Indiana generally does- lose. They'll lose again in 2010, finishing out of bowl contention for the sixteenth time in seventeen seasons. We'll see if Lynch, who hasn't continued the momentum started by the late Terry Hooppner, loses his job as a result.