



The Nebraska Cornhuskers are the new kid on the block in the Big Ten in 2011, and the timing couldn't be much better. Their 4th-year head coach has the Huskers turned around after they hit bottom in 2007, and they hear opportunity knocking in their new conference home.

A year ago, I [profiled the Nebraska program](#) as they headed into their last year in the Big 12, including the obligatory crystal ball-gazing about Bo Pelini as possible successor to Jim Tressel at Ohio State. It is of course an understatement that there has been a lot of water under the bridge since that was written, but the article is still useful as a recent history lesson on the Husker program and the ongoing comeback being engineered by Pelini.

Until last fall, Bo Pelini was getting a reputation as a fast finisher. His 2009 team won their last five regular season games before dropping the 13-12 heartbreaker to Texas in the Big 12 championship game. Last year's team started out 9-1 and was ranked as high as 5th, right before an October 16th loss to Texas, but faded down the stretch.

They worked their way back into the Top 10, but then dropped three of their last four games...including 3-point losses to Texas A&M, and to Oklahoma in the Big 12 Championship. A disheartened Husker squad then pretty much failed to show up for the Holiday Bowl, where they dropped a 19-7 decision in a rematch with Washington, a team they had beaten by five touchdowns in September.

Despite the disappointing finish to 2010, and the daunting prospect of playing their inaugural

season in a new conference, the Cornhuskers are among the preseason favorites in the Legends Division of the Big Ten, and the [first USA Today poll](#) has them ranked 11th in the country. Are they for real? Can they find in the Big Ten the conference championship that eluded them for their last decade in the Big 12?

I wanted to find out what they're thinkin' in Lincoln.

Talkin' Huskers

I spoke with Nebraska writer Dirk Chatelain for that article last August, and this week I caught up again with Dirk, who covers Nebraska football for the Omaha World-Herald, and contributes to the OWH Huskers blog [Big Red Today](#), at [omaha.com](#). Here is how that conversation went...



DW: Dirk, we spoke a year ago in August as the Cornhuskers were gearing up for their final season in the Big12, and all the anticipation and excitement then was about the Texas game and trying to go out of the conference in a blaze of glory. Safe to say that didn't happen, although Nebraska had a Top 10 team for most of the year....but I wanted to hear you compare that with what the preseason feeling is this year as they prepare to play in the Big Ten for the first time.

DC: Well, it's really interesting, because last year was all about leaving old friends, and trying to go out with a bang, and there were a lot of political things going on...with Texas and other Big 12 schools...and Nebraska's motivation was really to sort of slam the door on everybody. And it sort of worked out....but it really didn't work out. Nebraska won a lot of the games it was supposed to, but it lost the games that really mattered. It lost to Texas and it lost to Oklahoma.

So it was a disappointment. This year, from a sheer anticipation standpoint, it's probably even greater. It's an introduction to a whole new era. The quality of the football team is probably comparable to last year. If you put the two teams on a field against each other, I'm not sure which one wins, but it's just a different vibe this year...because every single week, Nebraska is going to see a new face. It's sort of like playing 12 non-conference games.

The anticipation level is just so high....especially with going to Wisconsin for the first time...and playing at night for the Big Ten opener...and then the next week having Ohio State in to Lincoln. Going to Penn State....going to Michigan...having Iowa on Thanksgiving weekend. Every single week feels like a big football game. I think it's even a bigger deal than last year...

And the stakes are pretty high again. I mean, Nebraska has not won a conference championship of any kind since 1999, and people are getting a little antsy around here. Last year Bo Pelini lost a big opportunity, and this year the door is sort of open...in the Big Ten... for Nebraska to seize that trophy. So it's there for the taking...they just have to execute a little better.

DW: A lot of the talk has been that there may have to be an adjustment period for Nebraska, because of the fact that every road venue will be completely new to them....that it might be too much to ask for them to win the conference in the first year. It also occurs to me that next year (2012) will really be the same thing again...as they have to play another whole different set of conference teams on the road in another full slate of completely foreign venues. In other words, the adjustment period may be longer than just this year.

But the team does appear to be loaded. They have brought in a lot of speed and talent, especially on offense it seems, with kids like RB Aaron Green, WR Jamal Turner and Bubba Starling. Even having lost players like Roy Helu and Niles Paul, I'm not sensing a lot of concern about the skill position talent on offense.





