Now that Jesse Lamovsky has covered the length and breadth of the college football landscape in reasonably comprehensive fashion, it's time to take a look closer to home, at the Big Ten season of 2009; the award-winners, overrated teams, sleepers, and coaches in trouble. Less than three weeks until the season begins!

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Most Valuable Player- Terrelle Pryor, Ohio State: Easy choice. LeBron in Cleats will be the best overall player in the Big Ten, playing for the best overall team. Watch him make the Leap this year, boys and girls.

Offensive Player of the Year- Juice Williams, Illinois: The Juice led the Big Ten in total yardage in 2008, rolling up 3,892 yards passing and running, and with an impressive stable of weapons surrounding him, there's no reason why he can't top those numbers in 2009 for what should be a much-improved Illinois team.

Defensive Player of the Year- Greg Jones, Michigan State: With Northwestern's Corey Wootton still recovering from a severe knee injury incurred in last season's Alamo Bowl, and Penn State's Navorro Bowman one toke away from a six-month jail sentence, I'm going with Greg Jones, the middle linebacker in Mark Dantonio's defense. Iowa linebacker Pat Angerer and Ohio State end Thaddeus Gibson received consideration as well.

Freshman of the Year- Tate Forcier, Michigan: As a starter at the most visible position on the field, for one of the most visible programs in the conference, T-Force gets the nod by default. He'll struggle at times in his freshman season, but he'll have his moments, he's well-equipped to run Rich Rod's read-option offense, and at least he isn't Nick Sheridan. Prior to becoming the quintessential home of the white drop-back passer (Elvis Grbac, Todd Collins, Brian Griese, Tom Brady, John Navarre, Chad Henne) Michigan's quarterback tradition consisted mainly of two-way threats like Dennis Franklin, Rick Leach, Steve Smith, Jim Harbaugh and Demetrius Brown. T-Force isn't a new breed so much as a throwback to an old lineage.

Coach of the Year- Mark Dantonio, Michigan State: The tight-lipped Dantonio stands a good chance of leading his Spartans to ten victories and a shot at the Rose Bowl, and if he accomplishes both, this award is his with a bullet. Fun fact: despite twice going undefeated in the Big Ten, Jim Tressel has yet to win conference Coach-of-the-Year honors. Iowa's Kirk Ferentz won it in 2002, and Wisconsin's Bret Bielema won it in 2006. Tressel did win the
Paul "Bear" Bryant National Coach of the Year
Award in '02, as well as the
Bobby Dodd
,
American Football Coaches Association
and
Eddie Robinson
honors for that season. Took home a certain
crystal football
too, if I recall correctly.

Coach on the Hot Seat- You Name 'Em: As many as four Big Ten coaches find themselves perched on heated benches going into the 2009 season. Bill Lynch might not survive another debacle like last season's at Indiana; Bret Bielema
is on firm ground
at Wisconsin, but the natives are
already
restless and will
only be more so

if the Badgers don't improve on their 7-6 stinkeroo of '08; Ron Zook needs to improve on his 18-30 record at Illinois, stat, and although Rich Rodriguez's job is safe for the time being, he really can't afford to go 3-9 again if he wants to stay in Ann Arbor for a long time to come.

There have been a lot of reasons bandied about for the Big Ten's sharp decline in prestige over the last decade, but one of the more underreported reasons is the drop-off in the quality of coaching. In the mid-to-late 1990's, when the conference was perhaps the toughest in America, it boasted an impressive roster of head coaches: Barry Alvarez at Wisconsin, early-stage Lloyd Carr at Michigan, the innovative Joe Tiller at Purdue, Gary Barnett at Northwestern, Glen Mason at Minnesota, Nick Saban at Michigan State, John Cooper (a dynamic recruiter if not an impressive game-day coach) at Ohio State, and Joe Paterno, then a youthful sprite in his early 70s. The departure of Saban to LSU (and his replacement by the ineffectual Bobby Williams and the buffoonish John L. Smith), the retirement of Alvarez, the downturn in the fortunes of Carr, Tiller and Mason and the aging of Paterno all played a part in the decline of the Big Ten as a whole.

There is hope for the future. Jim Tressel's record speaks for itself; Pat Fitzgerald is one of the brightest young faces in the fraternity, Mark Dantonio and Tim Brewster have their programs headed in the right direction, and the jury is still out on Rich Rodriguez, at the very least. Still, it would be nice if the conference could retain more of its native coaching talent. Saban, Urban Meyer, Les Miles, Bob Stoops, Greg Schiano and Mark Mangino all have varying degrees of ties to the Big Ten, either as head coaches (Saban), assistants (Meyer, Miles, Stoops, Schiano and Mangino at Youngstown State under Jim Tressel) or players (Miles, Stoops.) Jim Harbaugh and Bo Pelini are also talented young coaches who cut their teeth in the Big Ten. Bringing some of these fertile minds back to the fold would definitely benefit the conference.

Overrated Team- Penn State: I picked the Lions to make the BCS, but I have some misgivings about that pick. The top three receivers and three of the five starters from the offensive line are gone, the secondary needs to be rebuilt, and the appalling non-conference schedule isn't adequate preparation for a tough Big Ten slate that includes road games at Illinois and Michigan State as well as the

showdown with Ohio State at Happy Valley on November 7th. Don't get me wrong- this is a good football team. But it isn't as good as last year's edition and the Big Ten schedule is more arduous. Don't be surprised if Penn State ends up 9-3 and in an early New Year's bowl against an SEC opponent.

Rose Bowl Sleeper- Michigan State: The Spartans have the talent and the schedule to get to Pasadena on January 1st. Most of the defense is back, Kirk Cousins is a more-than-adequate replacement for Brian Hoyer at quarterback, and the loss of Javon Ringer won't cut as deep as you might think- even with Ringer the Spartans were ninth in the Big Ten in rushing last year. If anything, Ringer's departure might help MSU's offense- the Spartans leaned on him last season to the point of becoming extremely predictable. They'll need to be more diverse this season, and will be.

Cellar-Dweller- Indiana: First of all, it's Indiana. Second of all, Bill Lynch kicked his best player (Kellen Lewis) off the team this spring. Third of all, well... it's Indiana. It's going to be a long season in Bloomington- or a short one, considering this team has about a .00000000001 chance of playing December football.

Game of the Year: November 7- Ohio State @ Penn State: In all likelihood, the Buckeyes and Nittany Lions will decide the Big Ten Championship when they meet in Happy Valley the first

week of December. Twice in the last four seasons (2005 and 2008) the teams have finished tied for the conference title, with the tie-breaker going to the winner of their match-up, and chances are good that things are going to shake out in a similar fashion in '09. Home-field is no guarantee in this rivalry: Penn State
defeated the Buckeyes in Columbus
last season, while Ohio State
routed the Lions in Happy Valley
in 2007. Adding to the intrigue and unpredictability is the fact that this will be Terrelle Pryor's first game back in Pennsylvania since he spurned his native state for the Buckeyes as the top recruit in the nation in the winter of 2008.

Best Non-Conference Schedule- Ohio State: This is damning with faint praise. The USC game is an 800-pound gorilla, but the rest of the slate- Navy, Toledo and New Mexico State- are a pretty lightweight group. At least Youngstown State is off the schedule. The Big Ten as a whole just doesn't schedule out of conference the way it used to. For example,
in 1989
Michigan State played Notre Dame and Miami- the eventual top two teams in the final poll- in back-to-back weeks.
Two years earlier
the Spartans played USC, Notre Dame and Florida State out of conference. No one in the Big Ten schedules like that anymore.

Worst Non-Conference Schedule- Penn State: Way back in the day, Joe Paterno built the Nittany Lion program one cupcake opponent at a time. Their 2009 schedule hearkens back to the soft slates of yesteryear: Akron, Syracuse, Temple and Eastern Illinois. The Syracuse and Temple games are defensible- both programs are old rivals from Penn State's Eastern Independent days- but Akron's inclusion is sketchy, and there's absolutely no reason for the Lions to be playing Eastern Illinois, an FCS school that went 5-7 last season. It's one thing for, say, Glen Mason's Minnesota teams or Bill Snyder's Kansas State teams to load up on non-conference creampuffs. For an established power like Penn State though, it's a shameful state of affairs. Then again, it
is
a Nittany Lion tradition.

Best Offense- Illinois: The Illini are positively bristling with offensive weapons: Juice Williams at quarterback, Daniel Dufrene at tailback, Regis Benn and Jeff Cumberland at receiver, and Florida transfer Jarred Fayson at tight end. It's probably the best group of skill players in the conference, and augmented by three returning starters on the offensive line it will lead Illinois's charge back from a bowl-less 2008.

Best Defense- Ohio State: The Buckeyes have lost headliners James Laurinaitis and Malcolm Jenkins to the NFL and Tyler Moeller to some sucker-punching

douchebag in Florida, but this unit will simply reload, powered by a deep and diverse linebacker corps, a pair of veteran safeties and a loaded set of defensive ends. If the tackles hold up- always a big if with Jim Tressel's teams- this defense could go from very good to downright special.

Updated Big Ten Standings & Bowl Picks

Ohio State: Rose Bowl

Michigan State: Outback Bowl

Penn State: Capital One Bowl

Illinois: Alamo Bowl

Northwestern: Insight Bowl

Iowa: Champs Sports Bowl

Wisconsin: Motor City Bowl

Minnesota: At-Large Bowl Bid

Michigan: No Bowl

Purdue: No Bowl

Indiana: No Bowl