After nearly a decade of quiet the game of musical chairs has begun anew. The Nebraska Cornhuskers are now your newest member of the Big Ten

Conference, making it a twelve-team league. Nebraska's defection from the Big XII was just part of a nationwide shake-up that saw Colorado and Utah decamp to the Pac-10, Boise State move up from the WAC to the Mountain West, and the entire Big XII nearly fall apart before its flagship, Texas, decided to stay put.

Some random thoughts about Nebraska becoming the newest member of the Big Ten:

Missouri was a better fit: Mizzou was a more ideal pickup than Nebraska, mainly for geographical and demographical reasons. Yes, Nebraska is light-years ahead of Missouri in terms of football cache. But Missouri is located in a state with two urban areas bigger than any one in Nebraska and geographically it is situated much closer to the heart of Big Ten country. The Tigers already have one Big Ten rival in Illinois and a ready-made Big Ten rival in Iowa. Nebraska has only one potential in-conference rival: Iowa.

And for all of Nebraska's football prestige, it's just as much of a non-entity in basketball. The Cornhuskers have never even won an NCAA Tournament Game; indeed, with their addition the Big Ten is now saddled with two of the three present BCS schools that can claim that dubious distinction (Northwestern is the other, with South Florida the third.) Missouri has a solid basketball program, if not a great one and would be a nice addition to the Big Ten in that sport.

And it's not as if the Tigers are historically awful in football either. They haven't set the world on

fire, they've had some long dry stretches and they *were* the victim of the Fifth Down, but it's not as if they're Indiana.

Divisions: Keep it simple, stupid. The best alignment is straight East-West:

East	**West**
Penn State	Illinois
Ohio State	Northwestern
Michigan	Wisconsin
Michigan State	Minnesota
Indiana	Iowa
Purdue	Nebraska

I've heard the arguments that the East would be far stronger than the West under this alignment. I don't necessarily buy it. If anything the West would have been deeper than the East in 2009, with five of the former making bowl appearances as opposed to three of the latter. As for the talk that most of the traditional powers lie in the East, well, that's true… but just in case you hadn't noticed, Michigan has a been a bit down lately. Perhaps there would be an imbalance in the long run, but I doubt it would ever be as pronounced as, say, the Big XII North and South.

Anyway, preserving natural rivalries is more important than achieving a perfect competitive symmetry. I don't want to see Ohio State-Michigan go the way of Nebraska-Oklahoma and I *definitely* don't want to see a Buckeyes-Wolverines re-match in the Big Ten Championship Game. Keep it simple, keep it geographic and keep the rivalries intact; all of that is worth a little bit of competitive imbalance.

The Championship Game: Obviously there's going to be one. I don't necessarily want there to be one- I didn't want the conference to be expanded in the first place- but no one from the Big Ten called for my opinion, so I guess they're just going to go ahead and hold the damned thing.

So, where should the Championship Game be played? The obvious locations are the indoor stadiums: Ford Field in Detroit and Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. But there's no absolutely imperative reason to make this exclusively an indoor game. The weather in Big Ten country- the non-Minnesota, non-Wisconsin area at any rate- really isn't *that* bad in early December. It's chilly, but usually it doesn't get flat-out nasty around here until after New Year's.

That brings us to the ideal location- Soldier Field in Chicago. It's near the geographical center of the Big Ten; it's the "capital" of the conference just as Atlanta is the "capital" of the SEC and of course it's also the biggest and most cosmopolitan city in the region.

There's only one problem with this ideal location: Soldier Field itself. Back when it hosted the old College All-Star Game it seated more than 100,000 spectators; however, after a series of renovations it now seats only 61,500- a little small for the purposes of the Big Ten Championship Game. It is also situated right on Lake Michigan, subjecting it to high winds and cold temperatures. You're probably not going to have below-zero temperatures at Soldier in early December, but it will be chilly and the winds will be punishing.

(I'm sure a lot of Big Ten fans are going to have no problem with that prospect; the same folks who think it unfair that Big Ten teams have to travel to warm-weather locations for bowl games while SEC and Pac-10 teams aren't forced to freeze their asses and slog through snow for *their* bowl games. From a football standpoint, though, it doesn't make much of a difference. A good team has a portable game plan and should be able to execute it in every kind of weather. Besides, *warm* weather isn't necessarily

good
weather. Strapping on the pads and doing battle for three-and-a-half hours of 90-degree heat or a Louisiana monsoon can't be fun. If anything, the Big Ten has better
football
weather than, say, the SEC. Even late in the season temperatures are generally in the upper 30's and 40's, which is damned near perfect as long as it's dry.)

It won't be that warm the first week of December in Chicago, though, and the wind will be a factor. Lucas Oil Stadium will get the nod, which is fine, especially since Indiana isn't getting there anytime soon. But it would be nice to put that sucker outdoors in the City of the Big Shoulders, wind be damned. That's where I'd want it to be.

And then there's the $64,000 Question:

How much does this help the Big Ten? From a football standpoint I'm not sure it helps all that much; at least not in the short term. This is not the Tom Osborne-era Nebraska powerhouse we're talking about. The Huskers haven't finished in the top ten of the polls since 2001 and this is while playing in the Big XII North, probably the weakest single division in all of major college football. They've made strides under Bo Pelini, going 19-8 in the last two seasons, winning two bowl games and finishing 14th in 2009 behind their dominant defense. But Nebraska was only half a great team last season; superb defensively and subpar offensively. Pelini is a very good coach but as an offensive mind he makes Jim Tressel look like Don Coryell.

A bigger problem for the Cornhuskers is their location. The state of Nebraska simply doesn't produce that much top-level talent. For the Huskers to succeed they must glean much of their talent- particularly skilled talent- from places like Texas and California. In that respect they're much like Michigan, which has to raid Ohio for a good portion of its roster. When they've got the right coach at the helm- like Dr. Tom- and are in a conference that is filled with schools in roughly the same boat- like the old Big Eight or the Big XII North- that's a viable strategy. When they're in the same league as Texas, it gets a little bit tougher.

So basically the Big Ten has added a school in a lightly populated state that hasn't been a serious National Championship contender in over a decade. (I don't count Nebraska's sham appearance in the title game in 2002; that team was nowhere near elite.) For the sake of the conference, we have to hope Bo Pelini proves to be the real deal. One faded powerhouse is

enough; the Big Ten doesn't need another. Then again, Youngstown Cardinal Mooney graduate Pelini will have a ready-made pipeline to Ohio, especially with the conference switch, and that might not necessarily be a good thing for those partial to the Buckeyes.

Either way, 2011 is going to be a very interesting season.