Setting the scene on an early December Saturday in 2015...

The bespectacled veteran Ohio State head coach, dean of Big Ten coaches, gives a respectful nod across the field to his younger counterpart, the head coach of OSU's toughest conference rival of the early part of the decade. The Buckeyes' head man knows he can expect a spirited, physical game, what with the Big Ten title on the line, and both men devoted to a power running attack and punishing defense.

The team on the other sideline is led by a man named Bo. He was raised in a blue-collar, industrial town in northeast Ohio, and he learned a lot of his football at Ohio State, his formative years profoundly influenced by the Woody Hayes coaching philosophy. A respected coach in his own right now, he'll be trying to apply some what he learned in Columbus to beat the Ohio State Buckeyes and their revered coaching legend. The entire college football nation watches.

The more things change, the more they stay the same...

By the time September 2011 rolls around I'm sure you'll be subjected to all kinds of columns making the "Coach Bo from Ohio" tie-in...perhaps making more of it than it merits. I'm just getting mine out of the way early.

The new Bo of my fantasy game is of course Bo Pelini , Youngstown native, former Buckeye captain, and Head Coach of the Nebraska Cornhuskers , the newest member of the Big Ten Conference. I wasn't planning to include Nebraska in the TCF Big Ten Preview for this year, but I thought OSU fans could use a snapshot of Husker football a full year in advance of their joining the conference in 2011.

Pelini is Peaking

From the looks of things in Lincoln, the Huskers seem to be coming into their new conference home on a high note. After posting 9-4 and 10-4 records in Pelini's first two seasons at the helm of the Huskers, they begin their final year in the Big 12 as the favorites to win the North Division, and there's a sense around the state that the Big Red is truly "back" as a first tier college football program after several years struggling in relative mediocrity.

You've got to go back to 2001 , when Eric Crouch and a fairly anonymous supporting cast won their first eleven games and then became the subject of some controversy when they were selected to play in the BCS national championship game despite having lost their final regular season game to Colorado by a humiliating 62-36 score.

With the computers largely in charge, a Nebraska team that didn't win its division of the Big 12, failing to get to its conference championship game, (in which Colorado defeated Texas) was nonetheless selected by virtue of its 11-1 record to play for the national title. The BCS was further embarrassed when the Miami Hurricanes then humbled the Cornhuskers in the BCS Championship at the Rose Bowl, running out to a 34-0 halftime lead and coasting home 37-14.

Decline

The Huskers would open the 2002 season ranked at #10, but fell out of the Top 20 after consecutive losses to Penn State and Iowa State in September, and then only revisited the Top 10 once more in the decade, a brief ascent to #10 in early 2003, a season they would finish at #20. Only once in the following four seasons (2004-2007) would Nebraska win more Big 12 games than they lost, and Pelini inherited a proud but rattled football program beginning in 2008.

Pelini was the hottest coaching property in college football in January of 2008. After nine years as an NFL assistant (including a Super Bowl ring with the 49ers) Pelini had served three years as defensive coordinator at LSU, and the Tigers had just won the cut glass football with a dominating win over Ohio State in the BCS Championship Game. Pelini's defense had been the

star of the show that night, forcing three OSU turnovers and recording five sacks.

Meanwhile, Nebraska had bottomed out in 2007 with a 5-7 record under Bill Callahan, as the defense gave up 41 points or more five times, including an astounding 76 points in a loss to Kansas, and then 65 more to Colorado in two of the last three games of the season. Both the Athletic Director Steve Pederson and Callahan were history, and the Nebraska job was Pelini's for the asking.

Actually, that was the second time Pelini had been named Head Coach at Nebraska. Following the final regular season game of 2003, Frank Solich was fired and Pelini, then the first-year defensive coordinator for the Huskers, was named interim coach. In his head coaching debut, Pelini led Nebraska to a 17-3 Alamo Bowl win over Michigan State before moving on to Oklahoma in 2004, and then on to LSU.

Quick Turnaround

The job Pelini did with the Big Red defense in his very first season was remarkable. With essentially the same personnel that had been one of the Big 12's worst defenses in 2007, Pelini managed a jump to the 2nd-ranked defense in the conference in his first year. By 2009, he had completed an amazing two-year turnaround, as the Huskers led the nation in scoring defense last year, giving up just 10.4 points per game.

The offense was no slouch either, finishing in the nation's top 20 in scoring offense, passing offense and total offense in Pelini's first season as head coach in 2008. They took a step back offensively in 2009 though, finishing in the middle of the FBS pack in rushing offense (No. 62) and near the bottom of the pack as a passing offense (No. 101).

Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda in 2009

Nebraska under Pelini has been a fast finisher, winning six of their last seven games in both 2008 and 2009, including bowl game victories both years. The 2009 campaign started off well enough, with the only bump in the road over the first five games being a wrenching 16-15 loss

to Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, the deciding points coming on an 80-yard TD pass with 21 seconds left in the game.

Then disappointing home losses to Texas Tech and Iowa State on consecutive October Saturdays put the Huskers at 1-2 in the conference and 4-3 overall at mid-season. Cue the fast finish. Five straight Big 12 wins followed, including a 10-3 triumph over Oklahoma, and Nebraska had won the North Division and a chance to play Texas in the Big 12 Championship.

You'll probably recall that game as the one that lasted one second too long for the Cornhuskers. It turned out that their offensive problems (106 total yards) were too much to overcome even though Ndamukong Suh tossed Colt McCoy around like a rag doll for much of the day. A 33-0 whipping of Arizona in the Holiday Bowl lightened Husker spirits somewhat, but the psychic sting of another late loss to Texas has the whole state thinking about this coming October 16th.

In fact, until I started digging I really wasn't aware of how much it's all about October 16th . The rematch of the controversial 13-12 loss to the Longhorns this past December isn't the half of it. Nebraska has not beaten Texas in the regular season since 1974, and the history of the series has been a litany of heartbreak and frustration for the Huskers and their fans.

Given that history, and given the fact that this year's meeting in Lincoln is the last such meeting...maybe ever...it might be the biggest game of the entire 2010 season in college football. At least it looks that way as we sit here in August. And it will continue to look that way throughout Big Red country no matter what else happens between now and then.

But back to Nebraska being back.....

2010

For the first time since 2002, Nebraska will open the season ranked in the nation's Top 10. The first USA Today poll has them at No. 9. Here's how some of the other college football experts rate the 2010 Huskers: Lindy's - No. 11, Phil Steele - No. 5, Sporting News - No. 7, ESPN's Power Rankings - No. 11.

The early schedule isn't daunting. If they can survive a Week 3 trip to Washington to face Jake Locker and the Huskies, the other non-conference games...Western Kentucky, Idaho and S. Dakota St. are soft enough to allow them to open the Big 12 season at Kansas State with a 4-0 mark. A win there would then set the stage for the October 16th hosting of the Longhorns. The following week they travel to Oklahoma State, a team that is 2-0 against Nebraska since 2003, but the rest of the slate looks very manageable.

Oklahoma isn't on the regular season schedule, but a potential matchup with the Sooners in the

conference championship is on people's minds, assuming they get past Texas. Granted, it's the time of year when every team is undefeated and full of optimism about their prospects for the new season. But the rebirth of Nebraska football excellence under Bo Pelini seems to have the program and its fan base overflowing with warm, fuzzy feelings about the 2010 season. Last year's win over Oklahoma and the way they played against BCS finalist Texas has them believing that anything is possible. (2010 Nebraska Schedule)

Star Power on D Remains

The best player in college football in 2009, the Huskers dominant defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh, has moved on, but Pelini has two bonafide All-American candidates on his 2010 defense in junior defensive tackle Jared Crick and cornerback Prince Amukamara. Even though they're returning six defensive starters, the defense will remain fairly young in 2010, with just four seniors and as many as five sophomores projected to start.

Big Ten offenses can expect an aggressive defensive scheme from Pelini that will blitz them coming off the bus. He uses a four-man front, two linebackers and a hybrid linebacker/safety role that they call the Peso (akin to OSU's Star position), but he'll utilize formations with as many as six or seven defensive backs if the situation calls for it. Versatility in those player groups is what Pelini says he's striving for, allowing him to change formations without necessarily having to change personnel.

Senior-Heavy Offense in 2010

Most of the Huskers' offensive starters for 2010 won't ever play in a Big Ten game since as many as eight seniors will line up for the Big Red offense this year. Last year's quarterback Zac Lee is being pushed by younger Pelini recruits like Cody Green and Taylor Martinez, but the veteran is not going to give up the job without a fight, even after undergoing surgery to repair a tendon in his forearm during the offseason.

At the offensive skill positions, some key contributors return for 2010. Tailback Roy Helu rushed

for 1147 yards and nine TD's in 2009, and top receiver Niles Paul had 40 receptions for nearly 800 yards a year ago. The offense will have to get better though, if Nebraska is going to contend for a BCS berth. Despite having the nation's best scoring defense in 2009, the Huskers were actually outgained by 12 yards a game in Big 12 competition.

Recruiting for the Big Ten

OSU and Big Ten fans probably care less about the 2010 Huskers and more about what they'll look like in 2011 and 2012, so a quick look at their recruiting is in order.

It's important to understand first of all that recruiting for Nebraska is harder than it is for say, Texas or Ohio State or USC. The biggest single factor considered by recruits in their choice of a college destination is proximity to home, and let's face it, the University of Nebraska is located in proximity to....well, you get the picture. The state just doesn't produce very many football players that get scholarships from BCS conference schools.

An interesting study by SI demonstrated that there is a correlation between recruiting players from in-state or within a 200 mile radius, and winning football games. Over a five-year period (2004-2008) Texas coach Mack Brown got about 93% of his players from the state of Texas and 72% of them from within 200 miles of Austin. At OSU, 55.8% of Tressel's recruits came from Ohio, and 66.3% of them lived within 200 miles of Columbus.

At Nebraska those percentages were 16.7% in-state and 20.6% within 200 miles. So it's tough.

The incoming class of 2010 is pretty typical in its geographical breakdown...four players from Nebraska in a group of 20 signees. Well represented in recent Husker recruiting classes are California, Texas, Arizona, Louisiana, Illinois and Colorado. Surprisingly, Pelini had just one Ohioan in his 2010 group, and running back Braylon Heard from Pelini's alma mater Cardinal Mooney in Youngstown now looks like he'll be an academic casualty, at least for the time being. There are 13 commitments so far in the Class of 2011 ...three Nebraskans, one Ohioan.

The Cornhuskers have historically made significant use of the junior college system as a way to acquire talent that they don't grow close to home, and their well-known emphasis on encouraging walk-ons, made popular by Tom Osborne, has been revived by Pelini after Callahan briefly dismantled it.

Whatever success Nebraska has had on the field in the last half dozen years, it has not been because their recruiting classes have been highly rated by the experts. Only the 2005 class containing Suh and Zac Taylor (a JUCO recruit) was even a blip on the Top 25 radar of the talent gurus. A quick look shows no Top 20 class rankings by Phil Steele since 2005 (12th).

Will their recruiting strategy change now that Nebraska is joining the Big Ten? It can't change all that much...they're changing conferences, not locations, after all. And unlike some of their Big 12 brethren, they don't consider defense an afterthought. The *Dispatch*'s Tim May considers the question in an article
here
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Big Red Nation

No discussion of Nebraska football and their impact as a member of the Big Ten would be complete without talking about their loyal fan base. They fill their huge stadium every Saturday in the fall with a "Sea of Red" . They are noted far and wide for traveling well, taking a huge loyal contingent on the road to opponents' venues and bowl games. They are proud of the fact that they turn out ridiculous numbers of people for their annual spring game.

Wait a minute...that all sounds vaguely familiar. Oh, well...join the club. It's all good. The more the merrier.

A Bo at OSU?

Get into a conversation with any Ohio State fan, and when the talk turns to picking Jim Tressel's successor in Columbus, I guarantee you that two of the next four words spoken will be "Bo" and "Pelini". (This allows for "Luke" and "Fickell" to be spoken as well)

The conventional wisdom has it that the move of Nebraska to the Big Ten makes this scenario

more rather than less likely to eventually play out. In fact, it makes so much sense, and is so obviously logical and sensible that it will probably be impossible to get either Pelini or The Ohio State University to publicly touch the subject with a ten-foot pole for the next several years.

I'm guessing even mild speculation on the topic would cause considerable angst among the aforementioned Big Red Nation, who are, as we speak, sculpting statues of the man in town squares all over Nebraska. (I exaggerate, I believe, only slightly)

I would be the last person to suggest I have any insight whatsoever into the feelings of either party in this matter, but if I were a Nebraska fan, I might want to start getting used to the idea that they are simply borrowing Bo Pelini until he receives the call from Columbus.

It might take Buckeye fans a while to get their heads wrapped around the idea that their football coach will be named "Bo". But I'm betting that sooner or later, that call will come.

And I can't see Bo saying no.

Links:

ESPN Home

Big Red Today

Pelini bio (pdf)

History of Nebraska Football

Corn Nation

Huskers.com