Those who would place Ohio State and Michigan in different divisions in the new Big Ten alignment in 2010- and who would move The Game to a different spot on the calendar than the third Saturday in November- would do well to remind themselves of what happened to another once-great rivalry, one which happened to involve the conference's newest member.

If you're over the age of thirty-five or so and followed college football in your youth, it's likely that you remember when Oklahoma versus Nebraska was one of the must-watch events of the season. For nearly four decades starting in 1960 and ending in 1997, the Sooners- the Big Red of the South- and the Cornhuskers- the Big Red of the North- met at or near the end of the regular season, often on Thanksgiving weekend . In nearly every year of that span the game decided the Big Eight Conference championship and the accompanying trip to the Orange Bowl. And in the 1970's and '80s, when Barry Switzer's Sooners and Tom Osborne's Huskers were regularly competing for National Championships, the rivalry had national-championship implications on almost a yearly basis.

Twice- in 1971 and 1987- Oklahoma and Nebraska came into the showdown as the number one and number two-ranked teams in the nation. (The '71 Game of the Century , a 35-31 Nebraska victory, is regarded by many as the greatest college football game ever played.) Seven times both teams were ranked in the top five of the polls. For much of its heyday the Big Red Rivalry was far more important on a national scale than Ohio State-Michigan, which during the late 1970s and '80s had devolved into an affair of regional importance only.

When the Big 12 came into being, Oklahoma and Nebraska were placed in different divisions- the Sooners in the South and the Huskers in the North. There were no protected cross-divisional opponents in the arrangement- why should Oklahoma have to play Nebraska every year while Texas dines on the likes of Iowa State- so the Big Red Rivals met in a home-and-home every three seasons. Perhaps people on both sides placated themselves by saying, *"Hey, at least we'll meet in the Big 12 Championship Game a bunch of times! That'll keep the rivalry going!"*

Only they didn't. Oklahoma's resurrection under Bob Stoops coincided with Nebraska's downfall in the early 2000's. The teams met just once in the Big 12 title game, in 2006. By then the damage to the rivalry was irreversible. The showdowns between the Bootlegger's Boy and Dr. Tom, between the shit-kicking Sooners and the homesteading Huskers, between the Wishbone and the Power Option, those battles which caused fans across America to let their turkey and mashed potatoes go cold- they were banished to the memory of those who witnessed them. Nowadays the young fans never knew such a rivalry even existed.

The same could happen to the Ohio State/Michigan rivalry if the schools were placed in different divisions within the new Big Ten *and* if the Game were moved to another point on the schedule, which it inevitably would be if the Buckeyes and Wolverines were split up. Jim Delany is insisting that the Game will be played every season , citing the Oklahoma/Nebraska experience as a reason the teams will remain preferred rivals, regardless of divisional alignments.

But the Game loses its soul that way. There's a meaning to Ohio State and Michigan meeting at the same time every season, specifically on the third Saturday in November, at the end of the schedule. It goes deeper than trophies. The Game doesn't have to be for a shot in the BCS Championship Game, for the Rose Bowl, for the Big Ten East, for that open slot in the Insight Bowl- it doesn't have to be for anything *tangible*. Putting the teams in the same division wouldn't diminish the rivalry one bit, as some might think . It isn't as if the Rose Bowl has been on the line each and every season.

The Game is the only thing that matters or has ever mattered. Whether it's for the Big Ten title, to salvage a frustrating season or to ruin the other guy's magic-carpet ride, the third Saturday in November is the only thing. It's the only thing if both teams are 11-0 going in, or 6-5, or 0-11. Ohio State went 11-1 in 1996 and finished second in the polls. Michigan went 8-4 and finished

twentieth. The Buckeyes won the Big Ten Championship and the Rose Bowl. The Wolverines finished tied for fifth and lost the Outback Bowl. Did it matter that Michigan beat Ohio State that year? Watch this and answer the question- if you can stomach it.

Jim Delany seems to think the Game will be the Game no matter when and where it is played. He's wrong. The Game is the Game because of *when* it's played just as much, if not more, than because of who is playing in it. Playing it in October makes it just another game: not *the* Game.

And if moving the Game to October is bad, setting up a possible rematch in the Big Ten Championship Game is worse. First of all, college football rematches are inherently unfair to the team that won the first time around. Essentially you're forcing that team to win both ends, while the loser of the first game only has to win once. Imagine if Ohio State and Michigan had met again in the 2007 BCS Championship Game. The Buckeyes would have been told, in effect, that their victory over the Wolverines in November didn't matter. The Wolverines would have been told, in effect, that their loss was no sweat. Why play it the first time at all?

Secondly, rematches in college football are almost anti-climactic. The first meeting just seems to stick longer in the consciousness than the second. The collective memory retains Billy Cannon's Halloween night run against Ole Miss in 1959; it doesn't retain the rematch in the Sugar Bowl two months later. It retains the Choke at Doak in 1994; it doesn't retain the rematch in the Sugar Bowl a month later. College football, a sport where the regular season means almost everything, just isn't built for rematches. It isn't college basketball.

Third, again, the Game wouldn't be the Game at Lucas Oil the first week of December. It would be the Big Ten Championship Game, *featuring* Ohio State and Michigan. In this case, it's the *game*, not the *Game* that matters. It wouldn't be more intrinsically interesting to college football fans for being Ohio State/Michigan than if it was Penn State/Nebraska or Michigan State/Iowa. Not to mention, like Oklahoma/Nebraska in the Big 12, a conference championship between the Buckeyes and the

Wolverines would be far from an every-year proposition, even if Michigan gets its act together at some point in the near future.

There's nothing wrong with a geographically correct divisional format with Penn State, Ohio State, Michigan, Michigan State, Indiana and Purdue in the East and Illinois, Northwestern, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa and Nebraska in the West. From a football standpoint it likely wouldn't be all that competitively imbalanced. Fitting Nebraska's fortunes into the Big Ten, the last decade of title games would have looked something like this:

2000: Michigan vs. Nebraska

2001: Michigan vs. Nebraska

2002: Ohio State vs. Iowa

2003: Michigan vs. Iowa*

2004: Michigan vs. Iowa

2005: Penn State vs. Iowa

2006: Ohio State vs. Wisconsin

2007: Ohio State vs. Illinois

2008: Penn State vs. Iowa

2009: Ohio State vs. Iowa*

**- The Hawkeyes and Cornhuskers finished with the same record with Iowa finishing higher in the AP poll.*

You've got four different teams finishing at the top of the West, with Iowa winning it more than anyone. The East is monopolized by the power trio, but no amount of gerrymandering is going to help Indiana, Purdue or Michigan State become perennial title contenders anyway. Nebraska never even meets Ohio State or Penn State in the championship game in this hypothetical decade. The competitive imbalance of geographically oriented divisions really doesn't exist. The competitive imbalance that is there would be there regardless of how the divisions were aligned.

There is just no good reason to split up Ohio State and Michigan. If it happens, it would be one of the gravest mistakes in the history of college athletics. Oklahoma and Nebraska might not be the best comparison, but it still stands as a warning that sometimes, the price of what might be considered progress is far too dear. Divide the divisions by geography. Keep the Game the Game. All will be right with the world, and with Ohio State and Michigan.