It's time to start sizing up the new-look Big Ten for the 2011 season, so today we'll look at some of the best match-ups for conference teams on this year's schedule, and do a preliminary ranking of the teams in each division. For those who have been living in denial of Big Ten realignment, consider this the first bite of the new reality sandwich.

For years the conference was referred to as the "Big Two-Little Eight", with Ohio State and Michigan dominating it more often than not. The rise to prominence of programs like Iowa, Wisconsin and Penn State have made the Big Ten a much more balanced conference in the last two decades, despite the six straight titles won or shared by the Buckeyes recently under Jim Tressel.

In 2010 though, there was once again a noticeable separation between the elite teams and the also-rans. In fact, the conference could justifiably have been called the "Big Three-Little Eight", as Ohio State, Wisconsin and Michigan State tied for the title with 7-1 conference marks, and no other team in the league had better than a .500 record in Big Ten play.

Again in 2011, the Badgers, Buckeyes and Spartans look like strong contenders for the inaugural conference championship game, and from all indications, the Nebraska Cornhuskers will jump right into the Big Ten elite in their first year. If any team from that quartet seems likely to fade this season, you'd have to say it's the Buckeyes, what with the coaching change, the suspensions, and the inexperience at key offensive positions. But those four teams still seem to be on a plane above the middle third of conference programs.

A step below the top tier of Big Ten teams is a group including Penn State, Iowa, Michigan and Northwestern. The Nittany Lions or the Hawkeyes could conceivably make a run at their respective division titles, but would still be considered mild surprises if they did that in 2011.

Most predictors of the 2011 conference races will assign Minnesota, Indiana and Purdue to the bottom of the standings, and they'll get no argument here. Illinois is coming off a comeback season, with a 7-6 record (4-4 in BT) and could make a case for a spot in the middle group, (but someone had to drop down here to give me three nice clean tiers of four teams each.)

That grouping doesn't take into account the new divisional alignment, so here's a look at how I think those races will shape up. For those of you still getting used to the idea of Legends and Leaders divisions, and still unsure about which teams go where....maybe my little memory trick will help.....The Legends Division consists of Iowa...and all the "M" and "N" schools. (Mich, MSU, NW, Nebraska, Minn).....Leaders Division ….all the rest. Now, isn't that easy?

Legends Division

- Michigan State - (2010: 11-2, 7-1) - It might be another green mirage, but I think this could finally be the Spartans' year. They have experience at all the offensive skill positions, including an excellent QB in Kirk Cousins, plus very solid running backs and receivers. Four tough road games (ND, OSU, Nebraska, Iowa) will present challenges galore, but this team will put up points every week, and as a program they are steadily gaining confidence. Questions remain

about inexperience in the back seven on defense, but Dantonio should have them ready. Toughest non-con game: at Notre Dame

- Nebraska - (2010: 10-4, 6-2 in Big 12) - This is almost a coin flip for the top spot in the division. I think Nebraska probably has a better team (at least a better defense) than MSU, but the first time around the Big Ten could prove tough for them, with every opponent and road venue being brand new. Schedule makers did them no favors, sparing them only Illinois, Purdue and Indiana in their inaugural season. The defense has two first team All-Americans, and the offense has loads of speed and young talent. Toughest non-con game: Washington

- Iowa - (2010: 8-5, 4-4) - Iowa lost four Big Ten games by a total of 11 points in 2010, and they were 7-2 before losing their last three conference games (including a loss to Minnesota). They lost a lot of talent on both sides of the ball, but they'll benefit from one of the softest schedules among conference contenders. They don't have to play OSU or Wisconsin, and they get UM and MSU at home. Regular season finale at Nebraska looks huge right about now. Toughest non-con game: Pittsburgh

- Michigan - (2010: 7-6, 3-5) - Michigan will undoubtedly get an emotional boost from the changeover in the coaching staff, and Brady Hoke will put a better prepared team on the field each week, but the Wolverines still lack the elite athletes, especially on defense, that they need to compete for the conference title. They should bolt from the gate once again, but their November is brutal, starting with back to back road games at Illinois and Iowa, and finishing with Nebraska and Ohio State. Toughest non-con game: Notre Dame (or maybe a decent SDSU team trying to knock off their former coach)

- Northwestern - (2010: 7-6, 3-5) - Like Iowa, the Wildcats avoid two of the top four teams in the conference (OSU and Wisconsin) which could be enough to boost them over Iowa or UM in the division standings. Road games at Iowa and Nebraska dot an otherwise soft schedule, as they get to host both Michigan schools and Penn State. Quarterback Dan Persa is on all the preseason all-conference teams, but this is still a team that won just three conference games a year ago with Persa, and their division is stronger top to bottom than the Leaders. Toughest non-con game: at Boston College

- Minnesota - (2010: 3-9, 2-6) - This is the year MarQueis Gray emerges as an elite player as the Gophers' quarterback, but there just isn't enough other talent around him to lift Minnesota out of the basement. Their best 2010 running back, DeLeon Eskridge, has left the program for

personal reasons, and you will search in vain for Gophers on the preseason all-conference teams. Hard to say whether eight returning starters from a truly bad defense is good news or bad. Toughest non-con game: at USC.

Leaders Division

- Wisconsin - (2010: 11-2, 7-1) - The Badgers were nearly everybody's favorite for the Leaders Division...and that was *before* they landed quarterback Russell Wilson as a transfer from N.C. State. They lost two fine offensive linemen in Carimi and Moffit, but the other three return, and the backs and receivers are solid. Former Big Ten Freshman of the Year, linebacker Chris Borland returns to solidify the middle of the defense. The non-conference schedule is ridiculously soft, so they won't really be tested before the Cornhuskers arrive in Madison on Oct 1. That contest, and then back to back October road games at MSU and OSU, should decide their BCS fate. Toughest non-con game: Oregon St.?

- Ohio State - (2010: 12-1, 7-1 - season vacated) - The Buckeyes young offensive skill position talent will have to gel quickly under a new coaching regime for them to navigate the early portion of the schedule unscathed. They have a date in Miami against the Hurricanes and a home date with Michigan State before Adams, Posey and Herron return from suspension. Then they travel to Lincoln for the Cornhuskers' first ever home Big Ten contest. Later road trips to Champaign and Ann Arbor will not be picnics either. Inexperience at QB should catch up to this team eventually, regardless of the size of the chip on their shoulder. Toughest non-con game: at Miami.

- Penn State - (2010: 7-6, 4-4) - The Nittany Lions have to settle on a quarterback and improve on a middle-of-the-pack defense if they are going to challenge for the Leaders Division title. Their early conference schedule couldn't be more favorable...they avoid both Michigan teams, and could conceivably be unbeaten in-conference going into November. But that's when the going gets very tough. They host Nebraska on 11/12, and then close out with dates in Columbus and Madison. Toughest non-con game: Alabama

- Illinois - (2010: 7-6, 4-4) - The Illini avoid the two best teams from the other division (UN and MSU) and in a scheduling quirk, host the Buckeyes for the second year in a row. In Nathan Scheelhaase, the Illini have an excellent running quarterback, but one with serious limitations as a passer. RB Mikel Leshoure is gone, and there aren't many identifiable playmakers on defense for this team, but they do have most of their best opponents at home (excepting PSU), so they've got a shot at contending. Toughest non-con game: Arizona St.

- Purdue - (2010: 4-8, 2-6) - The Boilermakers took a step back last year from a solid 2009 campaign, but injuries had a lot to do with that decline. They return 16 starters, including nine to a defense that should be good enough to keep them in most games. Rob Henry threw just 8 TD's last year against 7 INT's, and the QB was also the team's leading rusher....not usually the sign of a good offense. Miami transfer Robert Marve should be back from a 2010 injury, and that should help. Toughest non-con game: Notre Dame

- Indiana - (2010: 5-7, 1-7) - The Hoosiers managed but one conference victory last year, and it's hard to look down the 2011 slate and find very many Big Ten games to project into the "W" column this time around. New head coach Kevin Wilson has a Big Ten background as offensive coordinator at Northwestern before he assumed the same job at Oklahoma in '02. His is a multi-year project in Bloomington, but for now, the Hoosiers will continue to look up at the rest of the Leaders.

Marking the Calendar

Some of the 2011 games, in and out of conference, to plan your leaf-raking around:

9/10:
Alabama at Penn State....Notre Dame at Michigan

9/17:
Ohio State at Miami - Michigan State at Notre Dame - Pitt at Iowa

9/24:
San Diego State at Michigan

10/1:
Michigan State at Ohio State - Nebraska at Wisconsin

10/8:
Ohio State at Nebraska - Iowa at Penn State

10/15:
Michigan at Michigan State

10/22:

Wisconsin at Michigan State

10/29:
Wisconsin at Ohio State - Illinois at Penn State - Michigan State at Nebraska

11/5:
Michigan at Iowa

11/12:

Nebraska at Penn State - Michigan State at Iowa

11/19:
Nebraska at Michigan - Penn State at Ohio State

11/25 (Fri):
Iowa at Nebraska

11/26:
Ohio State at Michigan

Just find someone else to rake your leaves, okay?

Loose Leaves

The Buckeyes picked up two new commitments for the 2012 recruiting class when Luke Roberts, a linebacker from Lancaster, and Patrick Elflein, an interior offensive lineman from Pickerington (North) gave verbals to the OSU coaching staff.

Roberts is a 6' 2", 225 lb. inside linebacker who held offers from Purdue and Indiana in addition to several from MAC schools. Elflein (6' 3", 285 lbs) projects as a center or guard in college and also held offers from Big Ten programs Purdue and Northwestern in addition to MAC and Big East schools.

ESPN is suing Ohio State for failing to provide certain emails and documents requested by the news network under public records laws. There are links to coverage of the issue in my recent Hitting the Fan post here . Several media organs (the *Plain Dealer* and the *Dispatch* are seeking similar documents through regular channels) are digging into questions that remain (in their minds at least) about possible knowledge of player violations by Jim Tressel's superiors in the days and weeks after Tressel was made aware of the violations.

They are seeking internal OSU communications that could show that A.D. Gene Smith or other athletic department or administration personnel were advised about the player violations. Of course such communications might exist, but I'm skeptical that they do, for these reasons:

OSU discovered the emails to Tressel and his subsequent emails to Terrelle Pryor's advisor, and they self-reported them to the NCAA immediately....and then invited the NCAA to conduct what was essentially a joint investigation of their entire compliance and athletic department operation. If there were emails and other documents contradicting the official OSU version of events, why in the world would they have laid out the red carpet for NCAA investigators to come in and dig at will in their athletic offices? It just doesn't make sense to me. We'll see.

Much has been made in Buckeye Nation of what is perceived as an anti-OSU (or anti-Big Ten?) agenda on the part of ESPN. That may or may not be the case...the zeal with which they have covered the OSU scandals makes you wonder. ESPN does consider the fledgling Big Ten Network a competitor, for what that's worth. But I don't fault the ESPN people a bit for what they're doing with the records request. As I said, other media organizations are petitioning to get the same information...all in keeping with their mission of serving the public's right to know.

If they all come up empty on this fishing expedition, as I suspect they might, no real harm will have been done as the courts sort it all out and decide what can or cannot be seen by the public. If they find evidence of a larger cover-up at OSU, they will have to be given credit for doing the job they get paid to do.

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