

BIG TEN NETWORK

**Moderator: Elizabeth Conlisk
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9:00 am CT**

Operator: Good day and welcome to the Big Ten Network Big Ten Championship conference call.

Today's call is being recorded. Now at this time I'll turn the conference over to Elizabeth Conlisk.

Please go ahead.

Elizabeth Conlisk: Thank you James. Good morning, everyone. Thanks for taking the time to jump on the call. We thought it might be helpful for three of the folks who have been covering both Ohio State and Michigan State extremely closely all season long to give an overview of kind of what they expect in this weekend's game between Ohio State and Michigan State.

I'm going to let first Dave Revsine and Gerry DiNardo and then Howard Griffith give their overall top line, and then we'll open it up for questions. So Dave if you want to jump off first.

Dave Revsine: Yes, thanks Elizabeth. I'm really excited about this game. We're very much looking forward to getting down there. You know, I think for the conference it's a great spotlight game, two top ten teams you're dealing with, two teams that went undefeated in the conference - first time that's happened in more than a decade and just the second time since World War II, so it really is a marquee match-up.

I think it's going to be a great weekend for the league and clearly the national spotlight is going to be on the Big Ten, which I think is very exciting. From a Big Ten Network point of view it's a huge weekend for us.

We're going to do more programming than we've ever done from Indianapolis, and I'm thrilled to have Gerry and Howard alongside me. I mean, these are the guys who know the league inside and out, going to spring practice last year, pre-season practice this year, watching every game, talking to coaches during the course of the season.

I just feel like this is their time to shine much as the whole season is, but this is kind of our Super Bowl I guess. And so I'm excited to get down there and just be a part of what I think is going to be a great weekend for the Big Ten and for BTN.

Gerry DiNardo: Two things jump out at me. One, both of these coaches have done an incredible job under opposite situations. You look at Mark Dantonio.

We were there in the spring. As (Dave) mentioned, Howard and I were there in the spring. We couldn't even think of an explosive offensive player to talk about.

We - you couldn't get your arms around the offense. We all knew about the defense. And what Mark Dantonio has done developing the offense is extraordinary. The way he has developed his entire team, the way he has risen to tenth in the BCS when no one even was talking about him as one of the favorites in the Legends I think is an extraordinary coaching job and he obviously won the Coach of the Year Award.

Urban on the other hand had as big a challenge. I mean, we sat there saying, "Nobody can win every game in two years. You know, someone's going to get upset in the way - or they're going to get upset at some point in the way he has kept his team focused."

And people can criticize the schedule all they want. It's still hard to go undefeated regardless of who you play. Ohio State could've beaten any team that Alabama has beaten, and they could've lost to any team Alabama has lost to.

And so you can't really go by the schedule. For him to maintain this level of excellence I think is extraordinary, so both coaches have done an incredible job in my opinion.

Last thing and then I'll turn it over to Howard. I think the game's going to be decided when Michigan State's offense is on the field and Ohio State's defense is on the field.

I do not think it'll be decided when the best two units are on the field, which are Ohio State's offense and Michigan State's defense. I think they'll cancel each other out.

I think neither one of these coaches are afraid to have a trick play in the kick game. Neither coach is afraid to go for it on fourth down. I think it'll add to that excitement that we have two coaches that are totally comfortable taking risks.

But I'm going to be more curious how Michigan State's offense and how Ohio State's defense plays than I am the marquee match-up.

Elizabeth Conlisk: Howard?

Howard Griffith: Thanks for joining us everybody this morning and taking some time out. You know, my thoughts - coach has kind of given me what the - what he thought from a coach's perspective and what the two coaches had to get to this perspective.

And Dave has given you some historical perspective, so I kind of want to look at, you know, some of the players that are actually on the field and that are going to have an opportunity to really grow.

I think when you look at Ohio State first of all I think this is probably the best offensive line that they've had since we've been covering Ohio State for the Big Ten Network.

So that's obviously been a huge plus for them obviously with Carlos Hyde coming back, and what that line has been able to do to allow that running game to take it up a notch.

And you hear coach talk a lot about the I-back, of having a running back with the opportunity to have his shoulders parallel to the line of scrimmage coming downhill and it's very difficult to defend.

When you go back and you take a look at what Braxton has done everybody knows, you know, what a dynamic runner he has been over the last couple of years.

But I think you really saw the growth and the work that he's put in with Coach Herman and Urban learning the passing game. He's not a guy that gets back there in the pocket.

When he decides he needs to throw it he's very comfortable back there. He doesn't need to get back there and all of a sudden he gets a little shaken because the first string isn't open and he takes off.

But I think you've seen extreme growth, you know, from Braxton as a passer. The wide receivers have really stepped up this year and really read the field a lot and see the big plays downfield by Philly Brown.

And then also you think about this. They really haven't been able to use the tight end the way I think they used them a couple of weeks ago. So I think when - still have an opportunity to - with some one-on-one, man-to-man coverage with the tight end to be able to make some plays down the field.

I think when you flip to the other side and you talk about Michigan State and coach talked about how we were there in the spring, and he's absolutely right. We couldn't figure out necessarily how they were going to score points, how they were going to run the ball, how they were going to throw the ball.

It was really interesting and to watch them kind of go through this the entire season and finally earlier they decided on kind of coaching. He settled in. He still wasn't necessarily making all the plays he needed to.

Then you go to that wide receiver group that's been much maligned over the last, you know, couple of years because they've had a lot of drops. This year they've had some but they've made - they've come up with some incredible plays.

How about Langford from the running back position? He's really made plays as well. So I think when you look at both teams and coach talked about both starts and so Michigan State's defense, Ohio State's offense canceling each other out.

So I think what you've seen a lot though is the growth of Ohio State's defense, although they gave up a lot of yards last week, and you also saw the growth of Michigan State's offense truly growing.

So both coaches I think have done a great job of developing the teams, using the schedule to their benefit to get them to where they are right now. And as coach said, you know, Coach Dantonio is not afraid of pulling out trick plays anyplace on the field.

And I'll say this. Urban showed you earlier in the year that he's also willing to go for that 2 point conversion, so that's going to say something. And Michigan State will have to also be thinking about if Ohio State is pushing the most points.

Elizabeth Conlisk: Okay and with that I will turn it back to the moderator to - let's give people the opportunity to ask some questions.

Operator: We'll take our first question from Steve Helwagen.

Steve Helwagen: Okay for anybody there Michigan State's defense to date has been talked about quite a bit. I just went through the NCAA statistics though and I found that they only faced one offense that was in the top 50 nationally.

That was Indiana at Number 11. And probably you could say the same thing about Ohio State's offense. You know, the number of great defenses they played were probably pretty few and far between.

Just is the Michigan State defense in your mind legitimate? Have they proved it without having played, you know, a number of top offenses?

Gerry DiNardo: I think your better gauge - and I can't answer the question as it relates to what you said. If you have a chance watch the Ohio State offense against the Michigan State defense a year ago.

That I think is the best indication of how these two teams match up both from a scheme wise and a personnel - there's obviously changes in the personnel but I think that's the better gauge in this instance to get - that's I think how I would establish that match up more than the numbers.

Steve Helwagen: Just as a follow up what is it about Michigan State's defense in your mind that just, you know, sets them so far apart from everybody else?

Gerry DiNardo: Well their scheme is probably the biggest thing and the players. I mean, I think you could say the same exact thing about the Ohio State offense as you can about the Michigan State defense.

You have cutting-edge coaches coaching those units so they're at the forefront schematically. They both have good players and, you know, that's the result.

Some of the things Michigan State does on offense nobody else does. Some of the things Ohio State does on - and if I said - I meant Michigan State's defense no one else does.

If you look at Ohio State's offense as Howard mentioned no one else does those things and that's what separates them from everybody else. The Ohio State spread is not a sideline-to-sideline spread.

It is a down your throat I-back spread. That's different than the Indiana spread. When you look at Michigan State's defense their secondary is telling them what to do.

They don't cover the deep third if it's a run. They are on the line of scrimmage whereas most defenses - if I have the deep third by way of example I'm a free safety.

I have the deep third run or pass. Not at Michigan State. There's nine guys seven yards from the line of scrimmage. Before the snap and after the snap there's 11 guys and usually nobody behind them and if there is then obviously that's an issue.

Howard Griffith: I think when you look - and Steve you asked obviously a great question when you talk about Michigan State's defense. But as coach talked about looking back in last year's film - and I think ultimately you can't - it's easy.

You can go into the numbers and you obviously identified Michigan State as the top defense and Ohio State is where they need to be offensively. But as coach has talked about to me it's so much about what Michigan State's scheme is about.

And it's a much better defense than they had last year all around. They have better players. I think right now one of the things that I've talked about all year is this is a defense that when they give up a play on the field, they can quickly make an adjustment because it's a veteran defense.

Also couple that with the veteran staff who sees what happened. We had Max Bullough on earlier. It was probably about a month and a half ago. And one of the things that really intrigued me and got me really thinking was they know - the players, those 11 guys, they know where the weaknesses are in a particular call, right.

So one of those plays is against Indiana. They gave up - ended up giving up a big - I think a touchdown on the play. They thought they would only give up, you know, maybe 8 yards to 10 yards.

But they - because they recognized, "Okay if we play this solid defense and we have this call, this is where the weak point of this defense is." So I think you'll see that same thing happen versus Ohio State.

Ohio State's going to make some points because they just have, you know, elite players, talented players, players that understand where they need to go and also an offensive coordinator and a head coach that are going to find the holes in where the weaknesses are in that defense.

The key is in-game adjustment and I mean not necessarily when they come to the sidelines. Not when they go to halftime. I mean when they're on the field.

When you still have - in the middle of a drive and you're able to change and make a difference to a defense and those guys over there led by veteran linebackers, veteran defensive line, a unbelievable secondary, they're able to make those adjustments.

So when you talk about the scheme and who they've faced, I know that's going to be talked about a lot this week. But I think because neither team has really seen this style of scheme since last year since they played against one another, that's where I think you really have to focus and look big picture of where this game possibly could go.

And I think one of the reasons it's going to be so intriguing outside of the national ranking and what the implications are for this game - well for football people, football guys that want to get into Xs and Os, this is the type of game that it's really going to be fascinating for somebody to watch that way.

Steve Helwagen: Thank you guys.

Operator: We'll take our next question from Joe Rexrode.

Joe Rexrode: Hey guys. For Gerry and Howard you guys mentioned the offensive improvement for Michigan State. I mean, I can't remember seeing a team in one season change this much.

I'm just wondering for you guys either, you know, as analysts, coach, player, can you remember a similar situation where even if it was an offense or a defense where it was such a dramatic change from September to November?

Howard Griffith: I can't - I don't know that I was a part of a team -- I don't believe so -- that has made such a dramatic change. And it's really dramatic because you aren't sure if quarterback Maxwell was the guy.

I thought what was really - it was bad enough, people talked about it enough, people paid attention was what was happening at the tailback position, because all these other things - everyone was, you know, throwing the wide receivers out there, the quarterbacks out there but nobody was really talking about what was happening at tailback.

And I think once Langford got into that groove and he got better as he knew that he would continue to get more carries than he was going to be to go to, you can look at the games and watch the film and see that he was a much improved player.

And I think once you get that running game going, that's going to allow that quarterback to gain some confidence because the receivers are catching the ball.

The tight ends are getting the ball and I think you have to be - I think - and this is why I think Mark Dantonio is, you know, a special coach because he still stayed from what we could see even keeled with it.

Now obviously you saw him frustrated in certain situations when he thought the guys could play better but those guys - eventually they got better. And I think that's a mark of coaches that understand their player, understand how to coach and to get them to where they need to be.

And yes I think he did a great job of doing that much the way - you talk about Ohio State struggling. I mean, they got better. Yes they gave up yards this last outing but I think over the course of the year they got much better.

Gerry DiNardo: Yes I would reinforce what Howard said about the quarterback and the tailback. I mean, both those guys have been unexpected overachievers. I mean, for Connor Cook not to be the starter and then to be voted by the coaches as second team all conference I think is extraordinary.

Jeremy Langford who we studied last week for our pre-game show, and I'm actually watching him right now, I mean, he is a - just a perfect back for that offense.

He's not flashy. He's a lot like Carlos Hyde actually. And then if you go back to when Michigan State lost to Alabama, Mark Dantonio came back - of course him and Nick have a relationship.

And the athleticism at the line of scrimmage is what separates the Big Ten from the MAC and the SEC from the Big Ten. And Mark took that experience and came back and said, "We have to be more athletic in the offensive line."

And as you watch them they have become more athletic in the offensive line. So it's kind of been a perfect storm in their favor and with all three units. You know, we've talked about everybody but the wide receivers but the offensive line's more athletic and we all know what's happened to quarterback and tailback.

Howard Griffith: And just to throw one more thing out there about the offensive line...

Joe Rexrode: Yes so Gerry can you think of something that compares, either something that you've watched from the outside or your own experiences within a season?

Gerry DiNardo: You know, how about Ohio State a year ago? Now there was a coaching change but what was the Ohio State offense like in 2011 and then 2012, Urban's first year?

I'm trying to think. I don't know. Kevin Wilson's made some extraordinary progress offensively. I'm just trying to go through the league in my mind here as I go down.

Michigan going the wrong way. Personal experience - I don't ever remember this drastic of a change so I don't know. Those come to mind.

Joe Rexrode: Thanks guys.

Operator: Next we'll hear from David Briggs.

David Briggs: Hey this is fun you guys. Just with a kind of tepid interest for the first two Big Ten championship games, what does a showcase like this with all eyes in the country on Indy this weekend just mean for the Big Ten?

Dave Revsine: I guess I can take that David. I think it's huge. I think that - I understand that some people have some hesitations about the depth of the league and how good it is at the bottom and I think that's fair, although I think you could make the same claims about a lot of different leagues if you looked at them.

But I think we felt all year that there's some really good teams at the top of this league, and I think it's exciting that you end up with the two best teams in the league.

And I don't think there's any dispute about that playing in the championship games that you really do get this to be a showcase, that it's going to be sold out, that you're going to have national championship implications.

I think all of those things are really good for the Big Ten and I think that when you think in kind of your best-case scenario of what a championship game could look like - and the first year was exciting because it was novel and I think it was a really good atmosphere.

It was fun. Last year clearly wasn't. I mean, you had tepid interest I think is the best way to put it. You had a stadium that was 2/3 full. You didn't have the two best teams there.

And so I think that to have a situation like this in kind of a contrast to last year really shows the potential for a championship game and what it could be.

So I have no doubt it's going to be a great game. These are - based on what we've seen all year I think these are two really good teams and passionate fan bases, and it's going to be a neat game with huge implications and I think that's great for the league.

Howard Griffith: I think what you're going to find is it's going to impact the voting of the coaches, and when you look at the BCS it's 2/3 polls and 1/3 computers. You look at the Harris Poll.

They just do what the coaches do because they don't really know the game like the coaches and their background is that of one that says, "We probably should listen to the coaches. They know the game the best."

So you're going to see coaches that are voting watch this game. It's going to be a little bit different style than the Baylors, the Oklahoma States, the Oregons but the people watching and voting on the Coaches Poll are going to say, "This is a little bit different way of playing the game.

These are two really, really good teams. They could compete with anybody in the country, although they go about it a different way." So I think it's the first step of rehabbing the Big Ten.

I still think there has to be a lot of changes during the regular season to capture the same type of atmosphere and the same type of national attention, but I do think as long as we have the big stage Saturday night it's going to make an impact with the voters.

And I think you're going to see both these teams come away regardless of the result with the voters really, really liking the way they play the game and the high quality of the game. So from a voting standpoint I think it's going to be a huge plus.

Operator: Do you have anything further?

David Briggs: No that should be great. Appreciate it.

Operator: Thank you. We'll take our next question from David Woods.

David Woods: Yes I just wanted to ask Dave - I'm sorry. I missed that factoid you mentioned about this is the second time since World War II that something happened. And I'm sorry I didn't catch that.

Dave Revsine: Yes it's only the second time since 1943 that two teams went undefeated in conference play. The other time was the 2002 season. Ohio State and Iowa did it.

That was the LSU team obviously that won the national championship. So this year's only the second time since '43 that's happened.

David Woods: Okay I figured it was an extreme rarity like that but thank you for reviewing that.

Dave Revsine: Yes no problem.

Operator: We'll now hear from Franz Ross.

Franz Ross: So Langford is one of the premier backs in the Big Ten. He's up there with Carlos Hyde.

How do you think the Buckeyes' defense will handle a premier back like that, or for that matter do you think that Michigan State is going to, I don't know, switch to a passing offense to exploit the Buckeye secondary who has let up a number of 100-yard receivers this year?

Howard Griffith: Well I don't think that Michigan State is all of a sudden going to become this team that's going to throw the ball all over a lot just because their opponent has shown some vulnerability there.

Now are they going to have passes in the game plan? Absolutely. They'll be there but I think they'll still have to stay within their game - their framework of what their game plan ultimately is.

So I think when you look at, you know, Ohio State from the defensive standpoint, you know, they've got some corrections and some work that they need to take care of.

And they've got game film to look at that as far as interior running is concerned from what they had last week. I think when you look at, you know, Michigan State, they're going to try to run the ball.

I think they've got to try to establish themselves. I don't know that they'd want this game to necessarily be one-dimensional and all of a sudden Connor Cook has to carry the team on his shoulders.

I think they want to stay as balanced as they possibly can to keep that defense, you know, off guard.

Operator: Anything further Mr. Ross?

Franz Ross: No, no, no. That's all. Thank you.

Operator: Thank you. Once again press star 1 if you have a question. And we'll hear from Jeff Svoboda.

Jeff Svoboda: Yes. I just wanted to ask - obviously the Michigan State defense this year has been pretty impressive. But there have been some teams -- Indiana, Nebraska come to mind -- that have been able to move the ball against them at times.

Watching those games have you seen maybe where that defense is vulnerable and what teams have been able to do to attack it, and can Ohio State do some similar things?

Gerry DiNardo: You know, I can't. I can't say that I've studied that coach's tape. You know, and so based on sitting in the green room with a bunch of games going on I don't know that I could answer that.

Howard Griffith: Yes I think Ohio State's going to find, you know, through their film studies they're going to find some plays that they believe that are going to be successful against the Michigan State defense.

And you're right. There have been some teams that have moved the ball on them. But, you know, as I mentioned earlier I think one of the keys though is, is Michigan State able to make those on the field adjustments so that those big plays don't happen again?

So I think what you'll see between both coordinators on that side is really a chess game, a great chess match that's going to go back and forth that, you know, one's going to make a play.

The other one's going to have to counter. And I think it's going to be a great, you know, a great game to watch and we just try to watch how the teams and how the plays are going to try to develop to try to set something up for later on or later on in the series or later on in the half.

Jeff Svoboda: Thank you.

Operator: And as a final reminder press star 1 if you have a question. And we'll pause for a moment. And there are no further questions. I'll turn the conference over to Ms. Conlisk for any additional or closing comments.

Elizabeth Conlisk: Well I want to thank our three participants and thank all the reporters on the line for joining us. If you have any further questions, feel free to give me a call and I'll put you in touch with one of the guys. So thanks again and we'll see you in Indy.

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