

Takeaways From 2019 Big Ten Media Days: Part I



Big Ten Media Days may be in the rearview mirror, but we're still digesting all that was said during the two-day event in Chicago last week.

Conference commissioner Jim Delany, head coaches from all 14 member schools, coordinator of officials Bill Carollo, Big Ten Network president Francois McGillicuddy each stood at the podium for 15 minutes, while the coaches and three players from each school met with the media in respective hour-long breakout sessions.

With the dust finally settled, we have decided to take a look back at their comments and share some opinions on what was said. First up is staff writer Andrew Lind.

- Delany mentioned freshman ineligibility as one of his biggest regrets during his time as conference commissioner. And though his lasting legacy includes creating the Big Ten Network, driving conference realignment/expansion and molding the conference into a cash cow, he seems like he's stuck in the past when it comes to this particular subject. Imagine if freshmen couldn't play today. Ohio State, for example, doesn't win the 2002-03 national championship without impact newcomer Maurice Clarett. What about J.K. Dobbins, who was named the conference title game's most valuable player as a freshman? The list goes on, and it seems to me that freshmen being eligible does a lot more good than harm.
- Illinois head coach Lovie Smith has Illinois on the right track, at least in recruiting — and his beard is absolutely fantastic. The young Illini should be improved from last year thanks to several grad transfers and a couple of highly rated freshmen, but aren't good enough to compete in the Big Ten West.
- Nebraska, to nobody's surprise, is the dark horse candidate to win the conference in head coach Scott Frost's second year. Their matchup with Ohio State midway through the season is a trendy upset pick, too, and while I think it'll be a tough game, the Buckeyes should ultimately escape Lincoln with a win.
- Frost has the right attitude to turn that program around for good, but he's still going to face an uphill battle in recruiting for the foreseeable future. There isn't much talent within a 500-mile radius, and hitting on every single four- or five-star kid that pops up in that area is going to be important. I think Frost understands that (hence his comments on recruiting in Jamaica or Kazakhstan), but the Cornhuskers' ceiling is similar to that of Wisconsin — you can win the Big Ten

or a Rose Bowl, but won't be able to compete for a national title.

- I'd argue Mark Dantonio was the biggest thorn in Ohio State's side during Urban Meyer's tenure. It was clear the Michigan State head coach had a ton of respect for Meyer and his program, and I appreciated that he praised his counterpart in retirement rather than go the route of another coach in the conference — but more on that in a bit.
- Indiana head coach Tom Allen believes the Hoosiers have three different quarterbacks capable of starting. And thought the old adage in football is that if you have two quarterbacks, you don't have one, I believe all three are very talented. Utah transfer Jack Tuttle (the former high school teammate of Ohio State wide receiver Chris Olave) should eventually win that job and could help Indiana spring a late season upset or two (the Hoosiers finish at Nebraska, vs Northwestern, at Penn State, vs Michigan and at Purdue).
- Minnesota is also a program on the rise under P.J. Fleck, beating rival Wisconsin for Paul Bunyan's Axe for the first time since 2003 — 14 years is a long time. How good the Golden Gophers will be ultimately depends on who wins the quarterback battle between Zack Annexstad and Tanner Morgan, as well as their continued development. Ohio State doesn't play Minnesota for two years, but the 2021 season opener in Minneapolis is shaping up to be a good game.
- Maryland head coach Mike Locksley has not been a good head coach (his 3-31 record in three seasons at New Mexico and in a brief stint as the Terrapins' interim head coach would agree), but he was the right man for the job nonetheless. His ability to connect with recruits, particular in the DMV (Washington D.C., Maryland and Virginia) will help bring elite talent to College Park. It will surely make it harder for Ohio State to recruit in that area. I'm not certain the Buckeyes land former quarterback Dwayne Haskins or current defensive end Chase Young if they were going through the recruiting process right now with Locksley leading the Terrapins.
- Iowa faces a similar obstacle to Nebraska in that the local talent just isn't there, but head coach Kirk Ferentz gets the most out he can out of three-star prospects. And while he said he wishes he would have recruited harder in the past, that's always going to be a challenge for a program in the middle of nowhere — unless you're a tight end who wants to play in the National Football League.
- Purdue wide receiver Rondale Moore is a special talent, but I'm interested in seeing if the Boilermakers are going to be too reliant him this season. They've surrounded him with other talented receivers (all of which had offers from Ohio State), but their emergence will be key for a team looking to take the next step. Otherwise, opponents are going to focus on Moore and the Purdue offense is going to regress.
- Penn State head coach James Franklin's comments last year about being good but not elite were not misconstrued. Quite frankly, they were spot on. The Nittany Lions are just one step — or in the case of the last two games against Ohio State, one point — behind the elite-tier programs, and a big part of that has to do with his coaching in late-game situations. A bit of self-awareness would go a long way.
- Northwestern's Pat Fitzgerald praised his program's new facilities, which are among the best in the nation. That should continue to attract top-flight recruits, but university's admissions standards will make it difficult for the Wildcats to compete year-in and year-out. Last year's Big Ten title game appearance wasn't a fluke, though, and there's a good chance we'll see a rematch with Ohio State again this December. Clemson transfer Hunter Johnson, a former five-star prospect, will make Northwestern's offense even better than it was last season.
- I think Wisconsin's Paul Chryst nearly fell asleep at the podium as he awaited a question from the media. After a minute or so of silence, I was happy to see the conversation moved to running back Jonathan Taylor, who might be my pick to win the Heisman Trophy this season. The Badgers are breaking in a new quarterback this fall, and thought freshman Graham Mertz is going to be great

eventually, they're going to rely on Taylor until the wheels fall off.

- Rutgers head coach Chris Ash made an excellent point about potential conference realignment, which wasn't actually a conversation until a reporter brought it up at Big Ten Media Days. Yes, the conference is not balanced with Ohio State, Michigan, Michigan State and Penn State all on one side, but there is no way to make everyone happy or for the alignment to make sense. East and West is the best way to do it without forcing unwanted travel, ruining rivalries or adding additional schools. Lucky, I think that'll be solved in a few years when Oklahoma and Texas are added to the West and Purdue moves to the East.
- Jim Harbaugh doubled down on his comments earlier in the day about controversy following Urban Meyer, but then found himself in the middle of his own controversy with comments on the transfer portal and the mental health of his student-athletes. Just seems childish to criticize an opposing coach who you may never see again (in public or on the field) on his way out, then shows a lack of self-awareness to make controversial statements just a few hours later.
- Michigan is the overwhelming favorite to win the Big Ten according to the media, but I'm not sold on a coach who has yet to beat his rival or a team that lost more than half its top-rated defense. In my opinion, picking the Wolverines to win the conference (let alone make it to Indianapolis for the first time) is more about the media being uncertain about the Buckeyes with a first-year head coach, quarterback and several defensive assistants than anything else.
- Day has avoided naming Justin Fields the starting quarterback, which is understandable given Fields has only been in the program for seven months now. Challenger Gunnar Hooks has only been around for two by comparison, but that doesn't mean Fields doesn't have to prove to his coaches and teammates he's worthy of starting. Just handing him the spot, no matter if we all know how it ends or not, would not set a good precedent.
- Day continues to impress in his recruiting efforts and in front of the media. He says all the right things and clearly has a plan for keeping Ohio State among the elite in college football. Despite his ties to the NFL, I think he's going to be in Columbus for a very long time.
- Along those same lines, his approach is the reason I don't think Michigan will beat Ohio State this year (or turn the tide in the rivalry back in the Wolverines' favor). He learned how to respect the rivalry under Meyer and he'll continue to preach the same focus to his players. If it isn't broke, don't fix it.

Check back tomorrow for thoughts from staff writer Joe Dempsey.