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WSJ.com

SEPTEMBER 2, 2009, 11:29 P.M. ET

The Big Ten: Down and Out?

Bowl Losses and Population Shifts Sink a Revered Conference; 'Graceless in Defeat'

To win a national championship today in college football, a school must have certain building blocks. A massive fan base that buys tickets and makes donations. A legacy of success that attracts recruits. An administration willing to pay for top-flight coaches and facilities.

But it's become clear that one element trumps them all: local talent. The best players, increasingly, come from the South and West, and that's a problem—potentially a permanent one—for the Big Ten Conference.

As the college-football season starts this week, the Big Ten—an ancient group of Northern schools stretching from Iowa to Pennsylvania—is again out to rebuild its tattered reputation. The conference has lost its last six appearances in the Rose Bowl, equaling its longest losing streak there ever. It has won two Associated Press national titles since 1969—in 1997 and 2002—while the Southeastern Conference has won the last three in a row. The general knock on the Big Ten is that its players are slower than those in the other power leagues. Last year's 1-6 bowl record weighs on the minds of its fans and players alike. "I feel personally responsible," says Minnesota linebacker Lee Campbell.

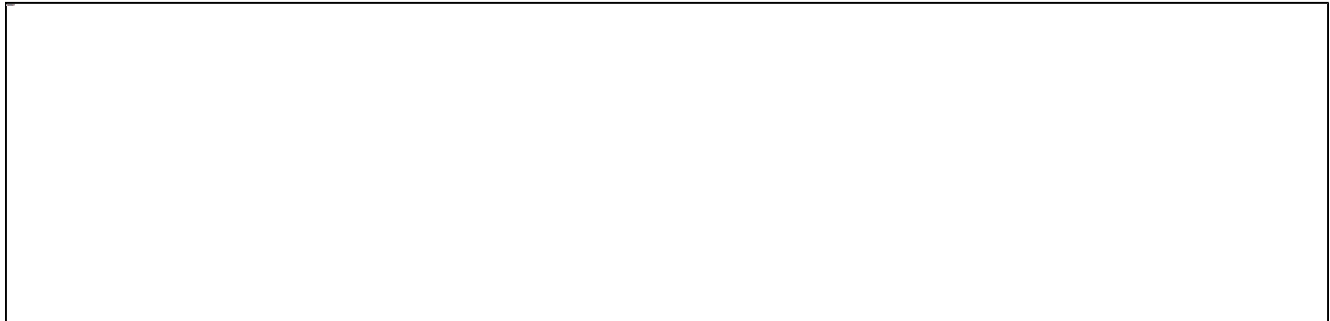


Getty Images

Clay Matthews of the USC Trojans sacks Penn State quarterback Daryll Clark at the Rose Bowl in January.

Money and tradition have nothing to do with the conference's decline. Founded in 1896, the Big Ten is college's biggest, richest and oldest major conference. The average undergrad enrollment at each of its 11 members—roughly 30,000—is greater than that of any other league, and the amount it shares in revenue has also been superior to that of the other major conferences. The conference's teams also have been perfectly willing to spend money on football. Ohio State's Jim Tressel and Iowa's Kirk Ferentz earn above \$3 million a year, placing them among the 10 highest-paid college coaches in the country. Average coaching pay is comparable to rival leagues.

Strategy isn't the problem, either. The league has



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conservative, three-yards-and-a-cloud-of-dust offensive approach. Last year, Penn State installed a new offense that gained more yards per game than national-champion Florida, and Michigan coach Rich Rodriguez helped pioneer the "spread" attack that forces opponents to defend the entire field.

Even top-level recruiting is solid within the region. When the North produces an elite prospect, such as Ohio State quarterback Terrelle Pryor of Jeannette, Pa., those players still tend to remain near home.

The main problem seems to be rooted in the population growth of the South and West, and the greater zeal for high-school football in those regions. Historically, Pennsylvania and Ohio rank third and fourth all-time in terms of the number of NFL players born within their borders. Florida is fifth. But today, Florida has nearly twice as many active players as Ohio and more than three times as many as Pennsylvania. The South and West continue to benefit because of the national population trend: 47 of the 50 fastest-growing metropolitan areas between 2007 and 2008 were in those regions, according to the Census Bureau. Playing football also is just not as important to Northerners. In the last school year, more high schoolers in Georgia played football than in Pennsylvania, according to data from the National Federation of State High School Associations, even though Pennsylvania has nearly three million more residents.

Where this is hurting the Big Ten is with elite, one-of-a-kind players who can dominate a game. None of the top-25 recruits in this year's freshman class, as ranked by recruiting site Rivals.com, were from a Big Ten state or chose a Big Ten school. Besides Michigan, which is coming off a 3-9 season and has been sidetracked by a report of possible NCAA violations, the conference's pillar programs aren't significantly changing their recruiting patterns. Ohio State's 2009 roster lists a combined 12 Floridians, Californians and Texans, compared to 14 in 2002. Penn State is only slightly less reliant on its region: 59% of its current players are from Pennsylvania, Ohio and New Jersey, down from 65% seven years ago.

go to Florida."

The Big Ten has been fighting negative perceptions of its football since the 1970s, when highly favored (but overly conservative) Big Ten teams repeatedly suffered embarrassing losses in the Rose Bowl. Jim Murray, the famed Los Angeles Times sports writer, would also lampoon Ohio State coach Woody Hayes, whose militaristic manner came to symbolize the Big Ten. "Woody was consistent," Mr. Murray quipped. "Graceless in victory and graceless in defeat."

In 1976, Mr. Hayes's unbeaten Buckeyes lost by 13 to a UCLA team they'd routed by 21 that season. In 1984, 10-1 Illinois faced 6-4-1 UCLA, which had several players ill from food poisoning. The result: UCLA 45, Illinois 9. "This makes me sick," Illinois defensive tackle Don Thorp ironically said afterward.

The Big Ten's performance dramatically improved in the 1990s, when more of its teams began playing on grass fields like at the Rose Bowl instead of AstroTurf or similar surfaces—but the rise of the South and West in the past few years has dimmed the picture again.

The standard response from Big Ten players, coaches and administrators is that the conference will be back. "We're playing the best of the best in their backyard," says commissioner Jim Delany, referring to the fact that most bowl games are played in SEC and Pac-10 territory. "If you look at it over a long period of time, we're about .500 against the SEC. It's cyclical."

"I don't know that anyone in this conference has an inferiority complex," says Ohio State's Mr. Tressel. "If you watch ball games, our guys will play toe-to-toe with anyone. If you watch the NFL draft, they'll get selected at the same regularity of almost every conference."

Circumstances may finally be turning in the Big Ten's favor. The Sept. 12 Southern California-Ohio State game—the league's next opportunity to prove its worth—is in Columbus, marking USC's first Big Ten road trip under coach Pete Carroll. USC will be playing with a freshman quarterback and without one of its top

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"I feel like everyone in the Big Ten needs to take all of this as a sign of disrespect," he says. "We're perceived as a very weak conference, which is not true. We're as fast as everyone else; we're as strong as everyone else. We just need to start winning these games."

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