

Oklahoma Sooners Sports News and Articles

The best of Big 12 football: Gearing up for the 2010 season

Dozens of names, teams and moments as we prepare for the Big 12's final season with 12 teams.

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OU receiver Ryan Broyles tops The Oklahoman's list of top players in the Big 12 for the 2010-11 season. PHOTO BY CHRIS LANDSBERGER, THE OKLAHOMAN

In the final year of 12 teams in the Big 12, The Oklahoman pays tribute to the number "12." We look at the 12 best players, 12 players on the spot, the 12 best players you've never heard of, 12 things we learned during Big 12 media days in Dallas, 12 things we didn't learn in Dallas, and look back at the 12 best moments in Big 12 history.

12 best players

1. WR Ryan Broyles, Oklahoma: It's scary to think what Broyles' final numbers would have been last season had he not missed two games with a fractured shoulder blade. And yet, he still set a school record with 89 receptions. A better season than that, and Broyles could be in the Heisman conversation.

2. DT Jared Crick, Nebraska: Despite playing in Ndamukong Suh's shadow, Crick still made a name for himself, recording a Husker record five sacks in one game. Without Suh, Crick will have to deal with more double teams this season, but he'll still be a load for opposing offensive lines.

3. DE Jeremy Beal, Oklahoma: He won't beat anyone in the 40-yard dash or win any powerlifting contests, but Beal plays defense with the best. Last season, he led the Sooners with 11 sacks and 19 tackles for loss.

4. RB Daniel Thomas, Kansas State: Perhaps overshadowed by the flash of DeMarco Murray and Kendall Hunter, Thomas is the best back in the league. A throwback workhorse, Thomas led the conference with 1,265 rushing yards on a Big 12-high 247 carries. At 6-foot-2, 225 pounds, he's a load to bring down and can wear down defenses.

5. QB Jerrod Johnson, Texas A&M: The preseason Big 12 Offensive Player of the Year led the league with 30 TD passes in 2009. Johnson can hurt defenses with the pass or run, which makes him a nightmare to defend.

6. CB Prince Amukamara, Nebraska: A lock to go in the first round of next year's NFL Draft, Amukamara had 64 tackles and five picks to lead the Husker secondary last season. The lockdown corner figures to anchor what should be among the best defensive backfields in the league.

7. LB Travis Lewis, Oklahoma: Lewis had 109 tackles to lead the Sooners last season, and he declared he was disappointed. That's understandable, considering he had an OU freshman record 144 the year before. Lewis will look to solidify himself as the next in a long line of great Sooner linebackers.

8. OLB Von Miller, Texas A&M: Miller, who led the league with 17 sacks, was a bright spot on a defense that was otherwise anemic last season. If Miller can get some help, the Aggies could be a player in the Big 12 South race.

9. QB Blaine Gabbert, Missouri: Had he not played on a badly sprained ankle most of the season, Gabbert might have contended for All-Big 12 honors. If the Tigers win the Big 12 North, it will be Gabbert's arm that gets them there.

10. CB Aaron Williams, Texas: Two other Longhorn defensive backs could have made this list (Curtis Brown, Blake Gideon), but Williams gets the nod because of his

propensity for big plays. Sooner fans will remember him well. He's the 'Horn that injured QB Sam Bradford's shoulder a second time.

11. OT Nate Solder, Colorado: The tallest player in the league, Solder is a giant 6-foot-9, 305 pounds. But he's also plenty athletic to deal with the quicker ends in the league. Solder could develop into a franchise NFL tackle in time.

12. QB Robert Griffin, Baylor: Healthy, Griffin might be the best player in the entire league. But is he the same electrifying quarterback after last year's ACL tear? If so, the Bears could be in store for their first bowl game in 16 years.

12 things we learned at Big 12 media days

1. Dan Beebe is done answering that question: It's clear the Big 12 commissioner is tired of defending the remaining teams' commitment to the league. "I still see many of you writing statements about not believing this is really going to hold together. You're going to have to see it happen over time," he said.

2. No expansion or title game is in the works: Beebe said the conference likes the idea of a round-robin schedule with no championship game and has no plans to expand to more than 10 teams in the near future.

3. Travis Lewis is entertaining: The Oklahoma linebacker is very gregarious and energetic. He handles interviews as well as he handles one-on-one situations with running backs. Advantage, Lewis.

4. Tommy Tuberville knows how to play the media game: The new Texas Tech coach has a great way with the media and even joked that he was going to name his starting quarterback based off the media's vote.

5. Jarrod Johnson is impressive: The Texas A&M quarterback was arguably the most impressive player at media days. He was confident in his team while also being respectful of the rest of the league.

6. Watch your mouth: New Kansas coach Turner Gill has implemented a no cursing policy. But senior cornerback Chris Harris said it's more frowned upon than staunchly upheld, noting: "It's college football"

7. Brandon Weeden is ready for the spotlight: The Oklahoma State quarterback handled his first appearance as the Cowboys starter seamlessly. His maturity was on full display.

8. Bo Pelini can coach: Um, not that type of coaching. Niles Paul said his coach didn't say anything about the move to the Big Ten until he told his players what to tell the media on the plane to Dallas. And when Paul was asked about it, he repeatedly talked of the 2010 season only. Well done, Bo, well done.

9. Mack Brown remains a politician: The Texas coach refused to play the blame game when asked about Nebraska's "Red Out Around the World" video, which featured a Beat Texas slogan before it was edited out.

10. Punctuality is not a Missouri trait: For the second straight year, the Tigers were late to media days.

11. Everyone has eyes on a title: Baylor's Antonio Johnson was one of the most outspoken players at media days. The Bears linebacker promised wins over Texas and Oklahoma and said the Bears' talent level was equal to anyone.

12. Alexander Robinson is underrated off the field and on it: The Iowa State running back, who finished second in the Big 12 in rushing a year ago, is not a household name, but he was just as impressive as Jerrod Johnson and Brandon Weeden were.

12 things we didn't learn at media days

1. Who is Texas Tech's quarterback? New Tech coach Tommy Tuberville brought Steven Sheffield and Taylor Potts to the event. Tuberville said he wanted to evaluate everything his quarterbacks did both on the field and off. This quarterback controversy could last all season.

2. How is Robert Griffin feeling? It was the question on everyone's minds in Dallas, yet Baylor didn't bring its standout quarterback. Thus, all we know is how his teammates and coach Art Briles feel about his potential return.

3. How much resentment lingers over realignment talks? Everyone said the right thing, and the main combatants, Texas and Nebraska, had clearly coached their players on what to say and what not to say.

4. Who is Colorado's quarterback? Despite Tyler Hansen earning the starting job to end the season at CU, Dan Hawkins insists the spot remains up for grabs in 2010.

5. Gary Pinkel's thoughts on a round-robin schedule and no title game? "If I gave my opinion it wouldn't matter" was Pinkel's response when asked about it.

6. Who will replace Todd Reesing at Kansas? New Jayhawk coach Turner Gill said the quarterback spot is wide open, with Kale Pick and Jordan Webb battling for the No. 1 job.

7. Who will fill the void when Nebraska leaves? Texas A&M will get the money, but that doesn't mean the Aggies will fill the void on the field. A&M, Texas Tech, Oklahoma State and Missouri all are vying for the role.

8. Will anyone miss Colorado? The Buffs were rarely mentioned as leaving the conference. All the talk was about Nebraska's move to the Big Ten and ... oh by the way, apparently Colorado is leaving too.

9. Where's the star power? Last year's Big 12 media days were basically an pre-NFL Draft rehearsal. Sam Bradford, Gerald McCoy, Ndamukong Suh and Colt McCoy walked the hallways of The Westin a year ago. This year's version featured a lot more unknowns.

10. How does Nebraska expect to be treated during its final Big 12 season?

The Husker players seem to expect the worst, but players from other programs, most notably Texas A&M, spoke of their respect for the program and their expectations that fans feel the same way.

11. Who is the most impressive newcomer to the Big 12 coaching ranks?

Texas Tech's Tommy Tuberville and Kansas' Turner Gill were both impressive in their first appearance at Big 12 media days, Gill with his passion and Tuberville with his polish.

12. Will Colorado leave in 2011? All signs point to the Buffaloes leaving for the Pac 10 after this season, but nothing has been finalized or announced.

Big 12 players on the spot in 2010

1. QB Robert Griffin, Baylor: If Griffin comes back healthy from his knee injury, the Bears become a bigger hurdle than they are without him. The Big 12 Newcomer of the Year in 2008, Griffin is one of the most explosive playmakers in the conference when healthy.

2. QB Garrett Gilbert, Texas: The Longhorns' sophomore signal caller has the pedigree to be a star. But replacing Colt McCoy is easier said than done, as the former Texas star sits atop the record books in seven major passing categories.

3. DT Jared Crick, Nebraska: After playing alongside Ndamukong Suh last season, Crick becomes the focal point of opposing game plans this season. He showed playmaking ability alongside Suh, but can he do it with all eyes on him?

4. QB Kale Pick or Jordan Webb, Kansas: This duo faces the task of replacing Todd Reesing, who led the Jayhawks to their best all-time record (12-1) and BCS berth in 2007. Pick is the favorite to win the job as a dual-threat quarterback but Webb could earn time as a spread-type signal caller.

5. QB Brandon Weeden, Oklahoma State: Weeden is the key to the Cowboys' offensive success. His arm and passing ability are ideal for Dana Holgorsen's offense, but he's only played one half of football, so it remains to be seen how he handles the rigors of a full season. His health and production could be the key to OSU's season.

6. DT Jamarkus McFarland, Oklahoma: The sophomore has the talent to become a playmaker along the Sooners' defensive line and help fill the void left by Gerald McCoy. If he can emerge inside, that makes sack master Jeremy Beal even more dangerous.

7. LB Zaviar Gooden, Missouri: An impressive athlete, the Tigers are hoping Gooden steps in to fill the playmaking void left by Atlanta Falcons first-round pick Sean Weatherspoon. Gooden is a 6-foot-2, 225-pounder with reported 4.37 speed, 40-inch vertical and a 405-pound bench.

8. K Justin Tucker, Texas: Who? ... The Longhorn kicker is going to be counted on to replace Hunter Lawrence, who was superb for Texas in 2009. If the Longhorns find themselves in any close games this season, they will be counting on a junior who has never kicked a collegiate field goal heading into the season.

9. K Patrick O'Hara, Jimmy Stevens, Bryce Easley, Oklahoma: Much like Texas, if the Sooners find themselves in any close games, one of these three specialists must step up and make a kick.

10. OL Nick Martinez, Oklahoma State: Martinez is slated to start at left tackle, a position manned by NFL top-10 pick Russell Okung for the past four seasons. A versatile performer, Martinez will have to hold off young competitors for the job, including redshirt freshman Parker Graham.

11. WR Jerrell Jackson, Missouri: Slated to become Missouri's No. 1 receiver and replace Danario Alexander, Jackson stepped his game up late last season, when an injury to Jared Perry pushed him into the No. 2 receiver role. The Tigers expect big things from the junior.

12. QB Tyler Hansen, Colorado: When Hansen took over the starting job from Cody Hawkins in late 2009, the Buffaloes' offense improved. Now the junior could be the key to Colorado's success this season ... and Dan Hawkins' job security.

12 best players flying under the radar

1. WR James Kirkendoll, Texas: With Jordan Shipley gone, the Longhorns will turn to Kirkendoll to be Garrett Gilbert's go-to receiver. Like Shipley, Kirkendoll has a flare for the big play. As a third option, Kirkendoll turned six of his 48 receptions into scores last season.

2. DB Jonathan Nelson, Oklahoma: By the end of last season, few defenders in the league were playing at a higher level than Nelson. If OU fills its void at cornerback with other players, Nelson will stay at safety. But he is versatile enough to shift to corner if the Sooners need him there.

3. RB Christine Michael, Texas A&M: Sure, there's Daniel Thomas, DeMarco Murray and Kendall Hunter. But no back was more highly ranked coming out of high school than Michael. Now a sophomore, Michael should have plenty of running lanes with QB Jerrod Johnson commanding most of the attention from opposing defenses.

4. WR Kendall Wright, Baylor: Without QB Robert Griffin, Wright was not a huge factor in the Big 12 last season. But with Griffin back, Wright, one of the fastest players in the league, could also become one of its biggest playmakers.

5. WR Scotty McKnight, Colorado: McKnight is largely unknown because the Buffs have been so bad offensively. McKnight still had 76 catches last season, and could vie for All-Big 12 honors if Colorado can finally get settled at QB.

6. OT Donald Stephenson, Oklahoma: Sooner fans may know about him, but no one else does. Yet even though Stephenson has yet to play a meaningful down, Bob Stoops compared his talent at left tackle to that of Trent Williams.

7. Derrick Washington, Missouri: After a subpar 2009 campaign, Washington dropped 10 pounds during the offseason and says he's quicker than ever, which he showed during an impressive spring. If Washington continues that into the fall, Missouri will be a load to handle offensively.

8. LB Orie Lemon, Oklahoma State: OSU fans know about Lemon, who was primed to anchor the Poke defense before suffering a season-ending knee injury the week of the opener. Lemon is back, and, if fully recovered, could become one of the top linebackers in the league.

9. WR Alex Torres, Texas Tech: He's no Michael Crabtree, and this is no longer Mike Leach's offense, but Torres, a former walk-on, should be among the top receivers in the league.

10. QB Austen Arnaud, Iowa State: Hard to believe a QB could fly under the radar. But that's the case with Arnaud, who missed three games with a bruised hand last season. Arnaud, who has a commanding presence, is the leader of the Cyclone offense, and if he plays well, Iowa State could be in store for another bowl appearance and another winning season.

11. S Markelle Martin, Oklahoma State: A physical hitter who also excels in coverage, expect Martin to be OSU's top playmaker in the secondary. If the junior continues to improve, he could be in the running for All-Big 12 honors.

12. RB Rex Burkhead, Nebraska: After coming back from injury late in the season, Burkhead was probably Nebraska's best offensive weapon. In the Holiday Bowl, he ran for 92 yards and a TD. The Huskers need him to build off that performance to help turn around an offense that stunk last season.

Big 12's best moments

1. Vince Young's TD scamper: Capping one of the top individual performances in college football history, Young dashed 8 yards for the game-winning TD as Texas topped USC 41-38 to win the 2005 national championship.

2. Superman lives: Safety Roy Williams sailed over the Texas offensive line and collided with quarterback Chris Simms. The hit jarred the ball loose, and OU linebacker Teddy Lehman intercepted it as he stepped into the end zone to seal a 14-3 Red River victory for the Sooners in 2001.

3. The last straw: In a Big 12 Championship battle featuring Heisman contenders Colt McCoy of Texas and Ndamukong Suh of Nebraska last year, the Huskers appeared to have the game won after McCoy's incompletion sailed out of bounds as time expired. But officials put time back on the clock, and Hunter Lawrence nailed a 46-yard field goal to give Texas a 13-12 victory and an appearance in the national title game. Had Nebraska won, would the Huskers have stuck it out in the Big 12?

4. Touchdown, Crabtree: In a desperation effort, Texas Tech QB Graham Harrell found Michael Crabtree along the sideline for a 28-yard TD, as the Red Raiders stunned Texas, 39-33. Despite losing to OU, Tech finished in a three-way tie for the South Division title in 2008.

5. Sooner Magic returns: It was no one play. Just total domination. OU's defense throttled Florida State's high-powered attack, as the Sooners rolled to a 13-2 victory in the Orange Bowl to claim the school's seventh national championship in 2000.

6. K-State falls: In 1998, the Manhattan Miracle was near complete, as Kansas State was one game away from a berth in the national championship. But in the Big 12 Championship, Texas A&M took K-State to double overtime, then pulled off a 36-33 upset when Sirr Parker hauled in a 32-yard TD reception on 3rd-and-17.

7. Huskers win on a kick: In the waning seconds of a 1997 game, Nebraska QB Scott Frost dropped back to pass, needing a TD to tie Missouri and send the game to overtime. The pass bounced off Shevin Wiggins' chest and appeared headed toward the turf. But Wiggins kicked the ball up, into the outstretched arms of Matt Davison. The Huskers went on to win 45-38 in overtime, and eventually won the national title.

8. Marshall to the rescue: In the final moments at Kyle Field, linebacker Torrance Marshall returned an interception 41 yards for a score, lifting OU to a remarkable 35-31 victory, which propelled the Sooners to the 2000 national title.

9. Crouch with the catch: With his signature Heisman moment, Eric Crouch reeled in a 63-yard TD reverse throwback pass, igniting Nebraska to a 20-10 win over the Sooners in 2001.

10. Brown rolls left: Facing a 4th-and-1 at the Longhorns' 28 late in the inaugural Big 12 Championship in 1996, Texas QB James Brown rolled left and found tight end Derek Lewis for a 61-yard, game-clinching first down. Texas won 37-27.

11. Brown counter play shreds Nebraska: In one of the greatest single performances by a Big 12 running back, Chris Brown sliced and diced Nebraska's defense for 198 yards and six TDs, and Colorado rolled to a 62-36 shootout victory.

Colorado advanced to the 2001 Big 12 title game, but it was Nebraska that advanced to the national title game.

12. K-State shocks the world, Sooners: In another stellar performance by a Big 12 running back, Kansas State's Darren Sproles went off for 235 rushing yards, and the Wildcats hammered top-ranked OU 35-7 in the 2003 Big 12 title game. It was the last time a North team won the Big 12 Championship game.



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