

Big 12 Championship a throw back

Brandon Vogel / Special to FOXSports.com
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Forgive football fans in Oklahoma and Nebraska if they get a little misty eyed this week. It's that time of year when nostalgia is being packaged and peddled across the country like so many iPods.

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and Charlie Brown are on the television sets again, more people will listen to a Bing Crosby song in the next week than the rest of the year combined, and the Cornhuskers and Sooners are playing for the conference championship.

Same as it ever was. Except it hasn't happened before. At least not in the Big 12.

Somewhat silently, with the downfall of Miami and Florida State and the rise of the Big East garnering much of the spotlight, the Big 12 has put together one of the worst seasons in the league's 11-year history.

The 2006 trail of tears:

- The league won exactly zero games against ranked nonconference opponents in nine attempts this year. September's Separation Saturday may not have cleared up the national title picture as much as we had hoped, but it went a long way towards cementing the Big 12's place in the conference pecking order.

On that third Saturday of the season, Iowa State fell to Iowa, Texas Tech was nearly shut out by TCU, Colorado succumbed to Arizona State, Nebraska folded against USC and Oklahoma "lost" to Oregon. Weeks like that early in the season had the conference looking like the littlest "Big" in the BCS.

- Since the league's inception in 1996, it has produced three Heisman trophy winners and five runners-up. This year, no conference representative will be invited to New York. The league's Heisman hopes went down with Adrian Peterson on Oct. 14.

- In nine of the Big 12's previous ten seasons, at least one team in the conference championship game was ranked in the Associated Press' top three. This year, No. 8 Oklahoma is the Big 12's only representative in the top 15.

For a conference that's used to contending for national titles, the 2006 campaign played out like one to be stricken from the record books, along with that Oklahoma-Oregon debacle.

Which is why the first meeting between Oklahoma and Nebraska in the Big 12 Championship game couldn't have come at a more opportune time.

With a horde of young talent learning the ropes in Manhattan, Columbia and Stillwater, the Big 12 slipped a bit from its usual perch near the top of the college football mountain.

Texas looked like the league's only contender, but when Colt McCoy went down, so did the Longhorns. Missouri and Texas A&M made strides, but they weren't quite ready to make the leap this year. Oklahoma and Nebraska both survived mid-season setbacks to secure their spot, and somehow it feels right.

See, this is the way we assumed it would always be when the Big Eight absorbed four teams from the



The Nebraska Cornhuskers and Oklahoma Sooners will renew their storied rivalry in the Big 12 Championship game for the first time. (Sooners-Huskers-inside / Getty Images)

Southwest Conference in 1996. In the quarter century prior to the birth of the new super-conference, either Oklahoma or Nebraska won the Big Eight championship in 23 of the 25 years. In the 1980s alone, the annual regular season game decided the conference champion seven times.

For the better part of 20 years, it seemed like every OU-NU game was a Great Plains playoff that was one of the last pieces in the national championship puzzle. Between 1970 and 1995, enough oranges littered the fields of each team's stadium to fill the Orange Bowl. The names were as electric as the games and plays themselves: I.M. Hipp, Elvis Peacock, Jarvis Redwine, Buster Rhymes, Wonder Monds, The Boz.

But the Big 12 changed all that. A two-division format meant that Oklahoma and Nebraska would no longer meet every year, and both teams filled their traditional post-Thanksgiving slots with regional rivals. The emergence of new conference heavyweights like Kansas State, Texas and Texas A&M that played a more modern offensive brand of football also meant the former Big Eight titans would take their lumps.

Back in 1996, Oklahoma opened play in the Big 12 with three straight losing seasons under John Blake. Bob Stoops arrived in 1999 and turned around the football program sooner than anyone could've imagined, winning a national title in 2000.

But as Oklahoma began its return to prominence, Nebraska started its descent. Stoops' first year in the conference marked the Cornhuskers' last appearance in the Big 12 championship game. In 2004, Bill Callahan was named coach and began overhauling the option offense. By the time Nebraska started tinkering Oklahoma was fully rebuilt.

The rivalry was officially in limbo.

Things heated up again pretty quickly, however. Callahan's arrival meant the departure of defensive coordinator, Bo Pelini, who went straight to Oklahoma, while Norman's most wanted — Blake — became Nebraska's defensive line coach. In his first game against the Sooners, Callahan, angered by a perceived attempt by Stoops to pad the score, angled for a stick-it field goal to end the game, then exited the field under the traditional hail of oranges and infamously called the Oklahoma fans "(expletive) hillbillies."

But it isn't hate that makes a rivalry great, it is the stakes, and they are as high as they've ever been between the new Nebraska and Oklahoma.

Stoops is seeking another BCS bowl berth, one that would cap off a tumultuous season and bring to a close perhaps his most masterful coaching job to date. Callahan, meanwhile, is searching for a signature win that would officially move Nebraska out of the rebuilding stage and into the reloading phase.

Even the game itself is a throwback with a modern twist. Remember "Irresistible Oklahoma Meets Immovable Nebraska?" The roles might be reversed this year with the Big 12 Offensive Player of the Year, Nebraska's Zac Taylor, going toe-to-toe with the conference's Defensive Player of the Year, Oklahoma's Rufus Alexander.

Sure there's no national title on the line and there won't be any fans flinging fruit from the stands. But in a year that has felt far from traditional in the Big 12, Oklahoma-Nebraska might be just the mix of new school and nostalgia the conference needs heading into the bowl season.

Now the only question is how far can you throw a bag of corn chips?

Brandon Vogel was the winner of the first Next Great Sportswriter 2 competition on FOXSports.com. Check out his blog, [HiPlainsDrifter](#).

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