First-year coach Bill O'Brien says he got a boost from a conversation with his former boss, Bill Belichick, when the New England Patriots coach told him he doesn't buy the talk that Penn State football is dead.

Montee Ball has changed the pronunciation of his first name - it's Mon-tay instead of Mon-tee, if you don't mind.

That's OK with the Badgers as long as their hard-charging tailback and Heisman finalist of a year ago keeps rolling up points and finding the end zone as Wisconsin aims for a third straight Big Ten title.

Denard Robinson should have Brady Hoke's offensive scheme figured out and after amassing more than 8,000 yards of total offense in his career, the talented Michigan quarterback will set sail on a senior season that got an enormous boost from a Sugar Bowl victory last January.

In a normal year in the Big Ten, Ball and Robinson would be the headline grabbers. But this is not a normal year in the Big Ten, not by any stretch.

There are new faces with big names in the coaching ranks. Former Florida coach Urban Meyer is back, trying to make Ohio State a force again after a 6-7 season that followed a memorabilia-for-tattoos scandal.

But Meyer's assignment pales when compared to what's ahead for Bill O'Brien, who left the NFL for Penn State. He is facing a future that no coach would ever want, fighting to keep the Nittany Lions afloat in the face of crippling NCAA sanctions following the Jerry Sandusky child sex-abuse scandal. He lost standout running back Silas Redd to USC on Tuesday.

"I'll be myself. I'm a guy who's always felt confident in my ability to coach football. I'm confident in my relationships," O'Brien says of reaching out to his players during a trying time. "I'm not into being a genie. ... What I can tell you again is that we have a good, tough, smart football team."

Leaders Division foes Ohio State and Penn State are both sidelined for the postseason by the NCAA, leaving only four teams to compete for a spot in the Big Ten title game and making the Ball-led Badgers heavy favorites. Wisconsin won the first league championship game a year ago against Michigan State before losing to Oregon in the Rose Bowl.

"I'm not blind and oblivious to the fact that we're in a division that has six teams. Only four of them are eligible for the Big Ten championship game," Wisconsin coach Bret Bielema said. "But it really won't change our approach."

Michigan State won 11 games in each of the last two seasons. But the Spartans must move on without prolific quarterback Kirk Cousins. And Nebraska has one of the top backs in the country in Rex Burkhead as the Cornhuskers look to build on their first season in the Big Ten.

Minnesota, Illinois, Iowa, Northwestern, Indiana and Purdue all hope to find their footing following disappointing finishes a year ago. A look at the Big Ten:

Legends Division:

IOWA - Key players: DB Micah Hyde, QB James Vandenberg, C James Ferentz, LB James Morris, LB Christian Kirksey, WR Keenan Davis. Returning starters: 6 offense, 5 defense.

Iowa coach Kirk Ferentz, in his 14th season running the Hawkeyes, is the dean of conference coaches. He needs six more seasons to tie Hayden Fry for the longest tenure at Iowa. ... The Hawkeyes are 55-12 at home since the start of the 2002 season and were 6-1 a year ago at Kinnick Stadium. But they are just 8-5 and 7-6 overall the last two seasons ... Vandenberg completed 58.7 percent of his passes and threw for 3,022 yards last season.

MICHIGAN - Key players: QB Denard Robinson, WR Roy Roundtree, OT Taylor Lewan, S Jordan Kovacs, LB Kenny Demens. Returning starters: 6 offense, 7 defense

Robinson has already set the NCAA single-season record for rushing by a quarterback when he picked up 1,702 yards as a sophomore. His numbers dropped off a bit - as did his carries - a year ago but he still had 1,176 in Brady Hoke's highly successful first season that ended in a Sugar Bowl victory. Robinson has a jaw-dropping 8,160 yards total offense for his career, most of it over the last two seasons. ... Kovacs has 266 tackles, five sacks, five forced fumbles, two fumble recoveries and four interceptions in his career for the Wolverines.

MICHIGAN STATE - Key players: QB Andrew Maxwell, LB Max Bullough, DE William Gholston, DB Johnny Adams, S Isaiah Lewis, RB Le'Veon Bell. Returning starters: 5 offense, 8 defense

Notes: Michigan State has had back-to-back 11-win seasons for the first time in school history. ... The Spartans have won more conference games (24) over the last four years than any other team in the league. ... Replacing three-year starter Kirk Cousins will be a challenge. He set nearly every school passing record and the Spartans were 22-5 during his last two seasons.

MINNESOTA - Key players: QB MarQueis Gray, LB Mike Rallis, WR Brandon Green, OL Ed Olson, LB Keanon Cooper. Returning starters: 7 offense, 6 defense.

Coach Jerry Kill thanked a reporter for asking him how his health was and then said he was feeling fantastic. Kill had a seizure on the sideline of a game against New Mexico State last

season. ... Gray's dual threat abilities and athleticism give the Golden Gophers hopes of improving on last year's three-win season. He set school records for single-game (174) and single-season rushing yards by a quarterback (966). As a passer last season, Gray - who had also been a wide receiver during his career - threw eight TD passes and eight interceptions, while competing 51 percent

NEBRASKA - Key players: RB Rex Burkhead, QB Taylor Martinez, WR Kenny Bell, LB Will Compton, DE Cameron Meredith. Returning starters: 8 offense, 7 defense

Nebraska's Blackshirt defense lost two of its best in linebacker Lavonte David and Alfonzo Dennard, voted the league's best cornerback. ... Burkhead had seven 100-yard rushing games last season, including five against league opponents. ... Nebraska went 9-4 - 5-3 in the conference - during its inaugural Big Ten season.

NORTHWESTERN - Key players: QB Kain Colter, S Ibraheim Campbell, LB David Nwabuisi, OL Brian Mulroe, WR Demetrius Fields. Returning starters: 5 offense, 6 defense.

The Wildcats must replace QB Dan Persa and the job will fall to Colter, who rushed for 654 yards and nine TDs a year ago. ... The winless bowl run continues for the Wildcats, something they hope to finally nix. They're 1-9 in postseason games, including last year's loss to Texas A&M in the Car Care Bowl. Last bowl win - only bowl win - was the 1949 Rose Bowl. That came a quarter of a century before current NU coach Pat Fitzgerald was born.

Leaders Division:

ILLINOIS - Key players: QB Nathan Scheelhaase, LB Jonathan Brown, DE Michael Buchanan, C Graham Pocic. Returning starters: 7 offense, 7 defense.

The Illini roared out of the gates with a 6-0 record last season only to lose six straight in a head-shaking slide that cost Ron Zook his job. The Illini did win the Kraft Fight Hunger Bowl over UCLA to finish 7-6. .... Scheelhaase has played in 26 games the last two seasons, passing for nearly 4,000 yards and rushing for another 1,492. ... First-year coach Tim Beckman said

some of his coaches went to State College trolling for transfers shortly after the Nittany Lions were hit with sanctions.

INDIANA - Key players: DT Adam Replogle, QB Tre Roberson, RB Stephen Houston, C Will Matte, DT Larry Black, Jr. Returning starters: 7 offense, 8 defense.

The Hoosiers won't improve until their defense does. They gave up 459 yards per game last season and had trouble stopping the run during a 1-11 season. Indiana was winless in the Big Ten. ... Coach Kevin Wilson played 16 true freshmen and 16 redshirt freshmen last season. The Hoosiers started 46 different players in 12 games.

OHIO STATE - Key players: QB Braxton Miller, WR Devin Smith, WR Corey Brown, DT Johnathan Hankings, DL John Simon. Returning starters: 7 offense, 8 defense.

Coming off a 6-7 season that followed the tattoos scandal, the Buckeyes turned to Meyer, who brought two titles to Florida before health issues sent him to the TV booth for a year. Meyer has been tested already. The Buckeyes have had three players arrested this summer. ... Meyer's first season in Columbus could be aided by a favorable schedule that features eight home games, including five of the first six.

PENN STATE - Key players: DT Jordan Hill, LB Gerald Hodges, QB Matt McGloin, LB Michael Matui. Returning starters: 4 offense, 4 defense (as of July 30).

First-year coach Bill O'Brien says he got a boost from a conversation with his former boss, Bill Belichick, when the New England Patriots coach told him he doesn't buy the talk that Penn State football is dead. ... After all the difficult times the Nittany Lions have encountered answering questions about the sanctions that followed the Jerry Sandusky sex scandal, O'Brien said the Nittany Lions can't wait for practice to start. O'Brien promises they will have some fun, despite all the distractions, though he lost star running back Silas Redd to USC.

PURDUE - Key players: QB Caleb TerBush, RB Ralph Bolden, CB Ricardo Allen, LB Will Lucas, DT Kawann Short, KR/WR Raheem Mostert. Returning starters: 9 offense, 10 defense.

Short made 17 tackles for losses last season and also had 6 1-2 sacks as Purdue registered its first winning season under Danny Hope, who is entering his fourth season. ... The Boilermakers improved to 7-6 by beating Western Michigan in the Little Caesars Pizza Bowl. ... Mostert led FBS schools in kickoff returns last season, averaging 33.5 yards.

WISCONSIN - Key players: RB Montee Ball, QB Danny O'Brien, LB Mike Taylor, LB Chris Borland, OT Ricky Wagner. Returning starters: 5 offense, 6 defense.

Ball has 61 career TDs, even though he has only started 18 games for the Badgers. ... Wisconsin has made four Rose Bowl appearances since 1998, the second most in that span to Southern Cal's five. ... O'Brien is a transfer from Maryland, hoping to repeat the success of Russell Wilson, who transferred to Madison from North Carolina State for one season. ... Coach Bret Bielema has done some adding since last season. He got married and also has six new assistant coaches on his staff. ... Wisconsin is 60-19 under Bielema in six seasons.