Care to predict this year's Big 12 North football champion? How about next Saturday? Or the Saturday after that? Didn't think so.

Sorting through this division and trying to find a leader isn't a new problem.

But this season, it appears to be a much less embarrassing problem.

Shall we finally throw away the pillows? Trash the jokes?

Is the downtrodden Big 12 North now finally somewhat formidable?

Consider that entering this season, North teams had lost 42 of the previous 57 meetings against South division opponents. Last season, the South's perennial doormat, Baylor, won all three of its conference games against North teams.

So victories last week by unranked Kansas State against then-No. 7 Texas, and by unranked Colorado against then-No. 3 Oklahoma, elicited jubilation from Fort Dodge to Dodge City, from Scottsbluff to Poplar Bluff.

Score one - make that two - for the North.

What does it mean?

Perhaps that the division is stronger. For sure, it's as unpredictable as ever.

Who's the leading contender?

Probably not Iowa State, the only team in the division that doesn't appear to have enough fuel to stay in this race. The Cyclones' next three games are against Texas Tech, Texas and Oklahoma.

Time was, starting 0-4 didn't automatically dismiss you from North contention. Not this season.

Remember when prognosticators all summer long pointed to tonight's game between Nebraska and Missouri as the game that would decide the North title?

Now, it appears a game earlier in the day down Interstate 70 will have just as much of an impact, if not a bigger one. No. 24 Kansas State hosts unbeaten Kansas in the biggest Sunflower Showdown since 1995.

And neither game will give us a clear-cut leader, as so many key games remain after today among the five contenders:

* Missouri at Kansas State: The Tigers haven't won in Manhattan since 1989.
* Kansas State at Nebraska: After winning at Texas and nearly upsetting Auburn on the road, K-State certainly won't be intimidated by Memorial Stadium on Nov. 10.

* Kansas at Colorado: Many believed, at one time, the Jayhawks had a favorable schedule, but winning in Boulder is obviously harder than we expected this season.

* Missouri at Colorado: See above.

* Nebraska at Kansas: The Jayhawks not only embarrassed the Huskers in Lawrence two seasons ago, they've come very close to victory their last two trips to Lincoln.

* Kansas vs. Missouri: Arrowhead Stadium hosted the Big 12 Championship Game last season. Might it host the game that decides the North title this season?

* Nebraska at Colorado: Can Huskers win a third straight in Boulder?

So, who wins the North?

If defense and special teams win championships, then it's hard to pick against Kansas State. The Wildcats have a clear identity with a stingy defense and a penchant for scoring non-offensive touchdowns (three against Texas).

There's also the favorable schedule, with three division foes - Kansas, Missouri and Colorado - visiting Manhattan. Plus, K-State has already emerged victorious in what many considered its toughest game of the season, at Texas.

And what if untested Kansas - with the nation's No. 1 scoring defense and No. 3 offense - pulls an upset?

Well ... check back next Saturday.