

2010 Big Ten football previews: Iowa

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

As the 2010 season inches closer, we have discussed every single Big Ten team, except for one. Our series of season previews concludes today with the No. 9 Iowa Hawkeyes, who come off an 11-2 2009 season capped by a 24-14 victory over Georgia Tech in the FedEx Orange Bowl.

At this moment, I'm not sure whether Iowa has what it takes to take the next step and dethrone Ohio State atop the Big Ten this season. However, after examining every Big Ten team, I definitely feel the Hawkeyes are one of two teams that has the most realistic chance of doing just that (the other being Wisconsin).

I won't dive into statistics as much here as I did in my others because I already did that earlier this month with my position breakdowns. But here's what I feel makes Iowa a legit contender in 2010.

It starts with the coaching staff. This is a good football team in Iowa City, and head coach Kirk Ferentz knows it. He knows what he has in place and has the type of coaching philosophy players buy into. He knows what buttons to push and what to get out of his leaders.

The Hawkeyes have one of the best quarterbacks in the entire conference with Ricky Stanzi. The stats may say he threw 17 touchdowns and 15 interceptions in 2009, but the more telling statistic here is 18-4. That is what Stanzi's record is as Iowa's starting signal-caller over the past two seasons.

Iowa has a few talented running backs it can depend on in 2010 with sophomores Jewel Hampton and Adam Robinson. When Hampton went down with a torn ACL last year, it was Robinson who stepped up and proved vital to the Hawkeyes' ground attack.

Up front, Iowa only returns two starters from 2009 that had significant playing experience in sophomore left tackle Riley Reiff and senior left guard Julian Vandervelde. But it was Reiff who handled the void left by Bryan Bulaga last season when he was out with his thyroid condition. And Vandervelde has seen plenty of game action over the course of the past two years.

Going back to Stanzi, he has a plethora of playmakers he can distribute the ball to at any moment. Whether it's Marvin McNutt, Derrell Johnson-Koulianos, Colin Sandeman, or anybody else, there is talent there. I expect McNutt and Johnson-Koulianos to carry the bulk of the receiving again this season, but I do think Sandeman will be better if last season's Orange Bowl is any indicator of his progress.

Defensively, what more can be said about this defensive line? It features quite possibly the best defensive player in the country with senior defensive end Adrian Clayborn. Some pundits have gone as far as saying Iowa's defensive line, made up of Clayborn, senior Karl Klug, senior Christian Ballard, and junior Broderick Binns, might be the best D-Line in college football.

Then add in the depth in the front four with guys like junior defensive tackle Mike Daniels and junior defensive end Lebron Daniel, who will be able to come in when one of those four needs a breather.

Coming into the season, there were concerns with the linebacking corps with players such as Pat Angerer and A.J. Edds leaving. Senior Jeremiha Hunter returns on the weakside, and now the Hawkeyes have players they trust in senior Jeff

Tarpinian and junior Tyler Nielsen.

The secondary returns both safeties – junior Tyler Sash and senior Brett Greenwood, both of whom know their roles well on this defense.

Special teams will be solid, as Iowa brings back one of the conference's best punters in senior Ryan Donahue, and the return game features the likes of Sandeman on punts, and then Johnson-Koulianos and sophomore Keenan Davis on kickoffs. The kicking game still looks to be a concern though, as neither senior Daniel Murray nor sophomore Trent Mossbrucker have established themselves.

And the schedule, while certainly providing some challenges, couldn't be more favorable to the Hawkeyes after what Iowa experienced in 2009. All of the other major conference contenders – Ohio State, Wisconsin, Penn State, and Michigan State – all have to come to Kinnick Stadium in 2010.

Now the Hawkeyes still have to go out and take care of business on the field, but this home slate is about as good as it gets for a team with a realistic chance of winning the Big Ten.

Simply put, there are enough pieces in place that Iowa can win the Big Ten.

The players seem determined this year to put everything they accomplished in 2009 behind them and focus solely on 2010. The right things are being said by everyone associated with the program. Now the question becomes can they back that up?

We'll start to find this out on Sept. 4 when Iowa and Eastern Illinois meet inside Kinnick Stadium.

Click here to read our season previews of the other Big Ten teams, each of which include audio from players (please note you must have either a paid monthly or yearly subscription, or

a three-day free trial, to *HawkeyeDrive.com* to access all of these): [Minnesota](#), [Illinois](#), [Indiana](#), [Michigan](#), [Purdue](#), [Northwestern](#), [Michigan State](#), [Penn State](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Ohio State](#).