

2010-11 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Illinois (premium)

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The Big Ten kicks off its 2010-11 men's college basketball season next week, so this week, *HawkeyeDrive.com* will give you rundowns on all 11 conference teams. Today, we'll showcase Illinois and [Purdue](#). The Fighting Illini come into this season ranked 13th nationally and will play Iowa twice this season – Dec. 29 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, and the weekend of Feb. 26-27 at Assembly Hall in Champaign, Ill.

When I look at Illinois, this team is the true definition of a dark-horse contender in this conference.

The Fighting Illini are coming off a season where they went to the NIT and lost in the quarterfinals at home to Dayton, so as expected, Illinois was not in the preseason top 3 when that was announced Oct. 28 at Big Ten Basketball Media Day.

But with that in mind, the Fighting Illini have enough in place this year to not only return to the NCAA Tournament, but to also possibly win the Big Ten and make a deep run towards a berth at the 2011 Final Four in Houston.

Illinois brings back three very crucial pieces from last year's squad, one of which is senior Demetri McCamey, who was voted to the Big Ten's preseason first team. The 6-3 guard averaged 15.1 points per contest for the Fighting Illini last season, and also had 254 assists as a junior, nearly matching his assist total from his first two seasons combined.

As McCamey goes, so does Illinois. He is undoubtedly the key

to the Fighting Illini's success this season.

What will also help is the veteran inside presence Illinois will have with senior forward Mike Davis and senior center Mike Tisdale both returning as well. Both big men averaged double digits in points like McCamey did. The 7-1 Tisdale was the lone player to start every game last season, and he averaged 11.9 points per contest. Meanwhile, Davis, who is listed at 6-9, led the Fighting Illini in rebounding last season and nearly averaged a double-double with 10.7 points and 9.2 rebounds per game.

In addition to McCamey, the rest of the Illinois backcourt has potential to be a real strength of this team. The Fighting Illini have a pair of sophomore guards that saw plenty of minutes last season in D.J. Richardson and Brandon Paul. Richardson started all but one game in 2009-10 and was fourth on the team in scoring with 10.5 points per contest. He also averaged close to 31 minutes a game. As for Paul, he was used more as a bench player, but his playing experience from a year ago should make him better as a sophomore.

Then there are two freshmen that have been talked about heavily in guards Jereme Richmond and Crandall Head. The 6-7 Richmond was a McDonald's All-American and was Illinois' "Mr. Basketball" after posting 21 points and 11.5 rebounds per game as a high school senior. Meanwhile, Head is the younger brother of former Fighting Illini player Luther Head, who was on the 2004-05 squad that lost the national championship game to North Carolina and is currently playing in the NBA.

The key this season for Illinois will be getting the younger players to mesh with the veterans such as McCamey, Tisdale, and Davis. Make no mistake, Bruce Weber has a good basketball team that has potential to be special this season. While I don't see a Big Ten title actually happening, it would not surprise me if Illinois did win the conference because the pieces to do so are definitely in place.