

2010-11 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Indiana (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 Indiana and [Michigan State](#). The Hoosiers will play Iowa twice this season – Jan. 23 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena and Feb. 5 at Assembly Hall in Bloomington, Ind.

As I observe the Indiana Hoosiers closely, I see a young team that is going in the right direction under head coach Tom Crean, but will continue to struggle as far as wins and losses are concerned.

At Big Ten Media Day last week, Crean acknowledged the climb his team will have in this conference will be challenging. Indiana, at best, is the eighth-best team in the Big Ten. To be fair, I wouldn't say that's so much a slam at the Hoosiers as it is that there are simply seven teams (at least) that are clearly better than them.

One area that hurt Indiana last season was injuries, including one most notably to guard Maurice Creek, who was establishing himself as the best player on the Hoosiers. Creek's freshman season was cut short by a knee injury suffered in Indiana's final non-conference game last December.

At the time of his injury, the 6-5 Creek was averaging 16.4 points per contest and was shooting over 50 percent from the field while starting 12 games last season, one of which was a

game against Kentucky where Creek had 31 points.

In addition to getting Creek back, what helps Indiana this season is that all of its other starters from a year ago are back. One bright spot from a season ago that returns is sophomore Christian Watford. The 6-9 forward led all Big Ten freshmen last season averaging 12 points and six rebounds per game. Watford and junior guard Verdell Jones III were the only Hoosiers to start all 31 games during the 2009-10 campaign.

As for Jones, the 6-5 guard returns as Indiana's leading scorer from last season after Creek's injury. Jones averaged 14.9 points per contest and was second on Indiana with 105 assists.

The Hoosiers' returning assist leader is the lone senior on the squad, 6-5 guard Jeremiah Rivers. After transferring to Indiana from Georgetown, the son of Boston Celtics head coach Doc Rivers started 28 games for Indiana last year and dropped 106 dimes.

Then there's 6-9 junior forward Tom Pritchard, who has started all but nine games in his Hoosier career. Last season, Pritchard finished tied for second with Rivers on the team rejecting 18 shots, one shy of Watford's team-leading 19 blocks.

Crean was able to add three freshmen to the fold for this season, but their roles remain to be seen. The two most notable incoming freshmen are 6-5 guard Victor Oladipo and 6-8 forward Jeff Howard. Oladipo comes from the Washington, D.C., area, and led DeMatha High School to a city championship as a high school senior averaging 11.9 points and 10.3 boards per game. Meanwhile, Howard is a Westfield, Ind., native who had a senior season in high school consisting of 16.8 points and 12.9 rebounds per contest.

Again, I look at Indiana and see a team that's getting better. I would think with five returning starters, which includes

Creek coming back from his knee injury, that the Hoosiers should be a better team than the 10-21 record it showed last season. I also believe Crean has something at Indiana now that he hasn't had the past couple of seasons since arriving in Bloomington, which is depth. As young as this team is, the Hoosiers have bodies to develop, and this will be essential to any success Indiana is to have this season, especially in the middle of conference play.

With that being said, I don't see too much of an improvement in terms of wins and losses given the strength of the Big Ten. The product should be more appealing to those who continue to pack Assembly Hall even during the program's recent struggles, but Indiana is still at least one year away from making a giant splash in the Big Ten.