

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

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*HawkeyeDrive.com*

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 Minnesota and [Ohio State](#). The Golden Gophers will play Iowa twice this season – Jan. 16 at Williams Arena in Minneapolis, Minn., and Feb. 13 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

I'll start off by saying this is a very good Minnesota squad that head coach Tubby Smith has in place. I really think the Golden Gophers' ability to win games down the stretch last season and make a run to the Big Ten Tournament championship game as a No. 6 seed did this program wonders. Not just because that all proved to be enough to make a second straight appearance in the NCAA Tournament last year, but because it sets Minnesota up for a legit run at a conference crown this year.

The best news to come the Golden Gophers' way this offseason came back in late August, when junior forward Trevor Mbakwe was ruled eligible to return to the team. Mbakwe, who is listed at 6-8, had previously played at both Marquette and Miami Dade College before transferring to Minnesota. He was suspended by the program last season before even playing a game after accusations surfaced from an incident in Miami that led to him being charged with a felony assault.

At Miami Dade College, Mbakwe averaged a double-double with 16.3 points and 13.2 rebounds.

Also making a comeback to the Golden Gophers this season is senior Al Nolen. The 6-1 guard missed the final 17 games of last season after being deemed academically ineligible. Despite missing the second half of the 2009-10 campaign, however, Nolen still finished second on the team in assists with 83 of them. Assuming he is able to make it through this entire upcoming season, Minnesota will get quality production from the point guard spot.

But what really makes the Golden Gophers a team to be reckoned with in the Big Ten is that in addition to both Mbakwe and Nolen's services being available again, the majority of this team's core is back this year. And this is despite the fact Minnesota lost its leading scorer from last season in Lawrence Westbrook.

One of the team's biggest leaders is its top returning scorer, 6-4 guard Blake Hoffarber. The senior from Minnetonka, Minn., averaged 10 points per contest last season starting 28 games. Hoffarber also played the most minutes for the Golden Gophers last season and shot approximately 47 percent from behind the arc and 85 percent from the free-throw line.

Minnesota also has three juniors along with Mbakwe that are going to be key pieces to its success this season. There's the one-two punch the Golden Gophers have inside with Ralph Sampson III and Colton Iverson, both of whom are 6-11 and can play either the forward or center spots on the floor.

Sampson III led Minnesota in rebounding last season with 193 boards and shot exactly 50 percent from the floor while starting 32 of the 33 games he appeared in. Meanwhile, Iverson only had four starts as a sophomore, but he was second on the Golden Gophers with 153 rebounds and he shot 48.2 percent from the field.

The last key piece in this junior class is guard Devoe Joseph, who led Minnesota with 105 assists last year and averaged 9.4

points per game.

One sophomore also figures to be in the mix for Smith this year – 6-7 forward Rodney Williams. As a freshman last season, Williams started four of 32 games, but he ended up leading the team in field goal percentage, shooting 54 percent from the floor.

As I look at Minnesota, there is a core in place consisting of veteran players. The key here is going to be building team chemistry early on.

The past two seasons have seen the Golden Gophers dancing as a 10 seed in 2009 and an 11 seed last year. Looking at this roster and what this team is capable of, there's no question in my mind Minnesota is a top five team in the Big Ten, and honestly, I think a 5-6 seed in the NCAA Tournament is realistic this year. The pieces are in place and Smith is a good enough basketball coach.