

# 2010-11 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Northwestern (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 Northwestern and [Wisconsin](#). The Wildcats will play Iowa twice this season – Jan. 12 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena and Feb. 17 at Welsh-Ryan Arena in Evanston, Ill.

Of all the Big Ten teams, the most difficult for me to get a read on going into this season is Northwestern.

During the summer, when I first began thinking about this upcoming year in the conference, I viewed the Wildcats as a team that would definitely make history and earn their first-ever trip to the NCAA Tournament. Looking back at last season, had Northwestern not lost Kevin Coble to a season-ending foot injury or lost winnable games late in the season to teams like Iowa and Penn State, the Wildcats would've made history last spring instead of playing in the NIT.

I figured with Coble coming back to the mix this year, Bill Carmody's squad would've been a lock for the NCAA Tournament.

Then the 6-8 forward who led Northwestern in scoring and rebounding during each of his first three seasons made a stunning announcement in late July that he wouldn't be returning. Now, I look at the Wildcats as a for sure "bubble team." If they aren't dancing this year, a return trip to the NIT is almost certain given everything else in place.

Despite the absence of Coble from this line-up, Northwestern does return four starters from last year's team and has a freshman guard in JerShon Cobb who is ready to step in immediately.

The most valuable piece to the Northwestern puzzle this season is junior John Shurna. The 6-8 forward averaged 20 points a game during Big Ten play last season, which was good for second in the conference. Overall, Shurna had 18.2 points per contest starting every single time he stepped on the floor. He was also the Wildcats' leading rebounder with 6.4 boards per game and leading shot-blocker with 32 rejections.

In addition to Shurna, Northwestern also returns its second- and third-leading scorers from 2009-10 in senior Michael Thompson and sophomore Drew Crawford, both of whom also started all 34 games for the Wildcats. Thompson is a 5-10 guard who averaged nearly 38 minutes a game as a junior last season and led the team averaging 4.1 assists per contest and had 36 steals. He was also Northwestern's top 3-point shooter and most reliable free-throw shooter, draining 41 percent of his shots from behind the arc, and 83 percent of his free throws.

As for Crawford, he was the media's selection last season as Big Ten Freshman of the Year after averaging 10 points and 4.3 rebounds per game.

The fourth starter from last year's team is junior Luka Mirkovic. The 6-11 center from Serbia started 29 games for the Wildcats last season, and while he only averaged 7.3 points per contest, he did post a 48.1 percent field-goal percentage to lead Northwestern.

Then there is the 6-5 Cobb, who replaces the outgoing Jeremy Nash in the starting line-up. The Decatur, Ga., native averaged 23.2 points, 7.8 rebounds, and 6.7 assists as a high school senior last year, and is considered one of the top

recruits Carmody has been able to bring to Northwestern. He is already being listed as a starter for the Wildcats, and they hope he makes an immediate impact as a freshman.

One question I see with this team, however, is depth. The one player coming off the bench who might be significant is sophomore Alex Marcotullio, a 6-3 guard who did appear in every game for the Wildcats last season and averaged 4.8 points per game along with 34 assists and 31 steals. Outside of him, however, there isn't a whole lot there.

If Northwestern is serious about making its first NCAA Tournament this year, then production needs to come on a consistent basis from its "Big Three" of Shurna, Thompson, and Crawford. Any night where one of these guys struggles, especially against a quality Big Ten opponent, and the Wildcats could struggle.

I won't be surprised if this team does finally go dancing in March for the first time ever, but given the recent track record in Evanston, it also won't be a shock if Northwestern just falls short of this mark once again. The talent is there, but I just feel like not having Coble is going to hurt the Wildcats, especially when facing teams that can go inside.