

2011 Big Ten football previews: Ohio State (premium)

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The first team I'll discuss in our series of Big Ten season previews is the Ohio State Buckeyes. Iowa does not play Ohio State in 2011.

(Before going in-depth in discussing the Buckeyes here, it needs to be established everything that has taken place in Columbus over the past year. Jim Tressel was found to have knowingly used players last season that should have been deemed ineligible and didn't make Ohio State's compliance office aware of what had happened. In the midst of an ongoing investigation into the football program, he resigned as head coach on May 30 and linebackers coach Luke Fickell was named the Buckeyes' interim man two weeks later. The Buckeyes also vacated their 12 victories from last season, including a 31-26 win over Arkansas in the Sugar Bowl on Jan. 4. Ohio State had finished in a three-way tie for first place with Wisconsin and Michigan State.

On Aug. 12, Ohio State had a hearing in front of the NCAA Committee on Infractions, and it is estimated to be 8-12 weeks before the NCAA makes any ruling. With this in mind, I won't assume any sort of postseason ban being placed on the Buckeyes this season, so I will write this with the mindset that unless told otherwise, Ohio State is eligible to compete for a Big Ten championship and/or bowl game in 2011.)

This has already been a trying year in Columbus and given everything that has taken place in 2011, the Buckeyes' sudden

fall has made the Big Ten appear more wide open than years past entering this season. Ohio State had won at least a share of six straight Big Ten crowns prior to vacating its wins from last season.

The good news with Fickell being in charge (at least for the time being) is that he understands the culture of Ohio State football having been a former player.

Entering 2011, the biggest issue the Buckeyes have is finding a replacement at quarterback for Terrelle Pryor, who ended up leaving the program in light of the ongoing NCAA investigation taking place. In spite of all the off-the-field chaos though, Pryor was as decorated a signal-caller as Ohio State has had statistically speaking.

The most likely player to take Pryor's spot is senior Joe Bauserman, but as of last week, Fickell had not decided on a starter for the Buckeyes' opening game against Akron on Sept. 3. Bauserman was Pryor's back-up last season and is clearly the most experienced quarterback on Ohio State's roster. Another name that could emerge, however, is true freshman Braxton Miller, who accumulated a combined 34 touchdowns as a senior in high school both on the ground and through the air.

Ohio State's offense will be shorthanded during its first five games with running back Dan "Boom" Herron and wide receiver DeVier Posey being two of the four players suspended along with Pryor for receiving improper benefits in exchange for Big Ten championship rings. Herron was the team's leading rusher with 1,155 yards on the ground last season as a junior, which was sixth in the Big Ten. He was also named first-team all-Big Ten in 2010.

Posey was second on the Buckeyes in receiving last year behind the now-departed Dane Sanzenbacher, hauling in 53 catches for 848 yards receiving and seven touchdowns. In other words,

these are two big losses in the earlygoing.

The good news for the Ohio State offense is that there is experience up front. Its top two tight ends from last season are both back in juniors Jake Stoneburner and Reid Fragel. Stoneburner had 21 receptions and two touchdowns for the Buckeyes in 2010, while Fragel added nine catches and a score himself. Both could be relied on heavily early on. The offensive line, meanwhile, might be Ohio State's biggest strength.

Returning is an all-Big Ten center in senior Michael Brewster, who comes into this year as a preseason all-American and a favorite to win the Rimington Trophy. The Buckeyes also have a pair of senior tackles back in J.B. Shugharts and Mike Adams, who is also one of the players suspended for the first five games.

Defensively, Ohio State loses a lot, seven starters to be precise. Gone are defensive end Cameron Heyward, linebackers Ross Homan and Brian Rolle, cornerbacks Devon Torrence and Chimdi Chekwa, and safety Jermale Hines, six of the Buckeyes' leading tacklers from last season. Heyward had 48 tackles and 3.5 sacks, and was a first-round pick of the Pittsburgh Steelers. Rolle and Homan were the team's top two leading tacklers. The three defensive backs combined for six of Ohio State's interceptions last season.

Up front, senior defensive end Nathan Williams returns after a junior season where he posted a team-high 4.5 sacks. Defensive back Orhian Johnson had 50 tackles to lead all returning players. The Buckeyes also have a pair of senior linebackers they'll be counting on this year in Andrew Sweat and Storm Klein.

Ohio State's special teams were dreadful last season, particularly in games against Miami (Fla.) and Wisconsin. Ben Buchanan returns as the punter, while Drew Basil likely

handles all other kicking duties in 2011.

As far as this season goes, I think the Buckeyes could be a better team than some have them pegged as being. While I don't see them ultimately winning the Leaders Division, having both Wisconsin and Penn State at the Horseshoe this season is enough reason to think they can at least compete. The suspensions are going to hurt this team, but it might not be all that bad. The first four games are all non-conference and all of them (yes, even the game at Miami on Sept. 17) are winnable. The last game, which is Ohio State's Big Ten opener, will be a challenge with Michigan State coming to town.

Then when players such as Herron, Posey and Adams return, the Buckeyes head to Lincoln, Neb., to play the Nebraska Cornhuskers, which will not be an easy task even with those players back in the fold. Throw in there as well trips to Illinois (who always seems to play Ohio State well), and of course, the Buckeyes' trip to Ann Arbor, Mich., on Nov. 26, and the Big Ten schedule is daunting.

The bottom line is there are too many question marks surrounding Ohio State this season. It's not to the point that they can't compete for a Big Ten title or go to a decent bowl game like the Capital One or Outback Bowls, but enough uncertainties loom that I can't see this team winning the Leaders. That's not an indictment on Fickell by any means. For all we know, he might turn out to be a fine head coach.

But the depth Ohio State supposedly has is going to be needed in 2011 in order for the Buckeyes to make any sort of positive noise on the gridiron. If some of these unheralded guys step up, then Ohio State still has a shot. If not, then the Buckeyes will struggle in a competitive league.

[Ohio State C Michael Brewster](#)