

2011 Big Ten football previews: Illinois (premium)

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After looking at [Ohio State](#) on Sunday, we turn our attention to previewing the upcoming season for the Illinois Fighting Illini. Iowa does not play Illinois in 2011.

I'll be honest. I'm really torn when it comes to Illinois here.

On one hand, I see a football team that has a really good season set up for it. The Fighting Illini were one of two Big Ten teams to win a bowl game last season, crushing Baylor in what was then known as the Texas Bowl, 38-16. And now coming off a winning season, Illinois enters 2011 with eight home games, including the first five games of the season being played at Memorial Stadium in Champaign.

I also see a legit quarterback in place with junior Nathan Scheelhaase, who started every game last season as a sophomore. Scheelhaase tossed 17 touchdowns to just eight interceptions, had a completion percentage of 58.7% and accumulated 1,825 yards through the air. The numbers seem somewhat ordinary, but considering his inexperience combined with what the backfield consisted of, it's not a huge surprise.

The feeling amongst the entire program is he has evolved into enough of a leader that his numbers should be better next season given his grasp of the offense.

However, this team could have been so much more this year. Illinois lost three high-profile players from last year that

decided to bolt early for the NFL in running back Mikel Leshoure, defensive tackle Corey Liuget, and linebacker Martez Wilson. If any or all three of these players stuck around for their senior years, the Fighting Illini would have enough talent in place to realistically compete for a Leaders Division crown.

Combine those losses with the fact that there's still uncertainty surrounding Ron Zook's future as head coach, and there's enough there to convince me that Illinois probably won't be playing in the inaugural Big Ten championship game on Dec. 3.

Offensively, I mentioned Scheelhaase already and what he's capable of in his second-year as a full-time starter. It looks like senior running back Jason Ford will be asked to fill most of the void left by Leshoure, who was second in the Big Ten in all-purpose yards with 1,893, and led the conference with 20 total touchdowns, 17 of which came on the ground. As a junior, Ford rushed for 480 yards on 99 carries and had seven touchdowns.

The receiving corps returns one key player in senior wideout A.J. Jenkins. His numbers skyrocketed in 2010, as Jenkins led Illinois with 56 catches for 746 receiving yards and seven touchdowns. Clearly, he is Scheelhaase's go-to guy.

Up front, the good news for the Fighting Illini is that four players with prior starting experience are back. Senior left tackle Jeff Allen and junior center Graham Pocic are the two cogs for Illinois, as both started all 13 games at their respective positions.

Defensively, the aforementioned losses of both Liuget and Wilson hurt. The two combined for 8.5 of the Fighting Illni's 23 sacks last season, and Wilson was second in the Big Ten with 112 tackles. With the D-line losing both Liuget and Clay Nurse, it might be led by a sophomore this year in defensive

tackle Akeem Spence. As a freshman, he started all 13 games alongside Liuget, and compiled 40 tackles, a sack, and he recovered a fumble in Illinois' Texas Bowl victory over Baylor. The other returner is junior Michael Buchanan.

In addition to losing Wilson, the Fighting Illini also lost Nate Bussey, who was the second-leading tackler on the defense last season. The linebacking corps does return senior Ian Thomas, and his 67 tackles from 2010 is the highest total among the defensive players who are back for 2011.

Senior safety Trulon Henry and senior cornerback Tavon Wilson lead the Fighting Illini secondary, which is the most experienced part of the defense returning for Illinois in 2011. Henry led the team with three interceptions and also recorded 64 tackles, while Wilson had a team-high eight pass break ups, as well as 48 tackles and an interception in 2010.

On special teams, there's a positive and a negative. The positive is that senior kicker Derek Dimke is back after connecting on 24-of-29 field goals in 2010, as well as all 43 of his PAT attempts. The negative is that Illinois has a void at punter with Anthony Santella no longer around. Santella had a league-high 64 punts last season, and was second in the Big Ten with an average of 44.8 yards per punt.

With Illinois, the firepower is there on offense. No, the Fighting Illini won't be as explosive minus Leshoure, but with Scheelhaase more experienced and a veteran offensive line, more points should be scored. The issue will be defense, especially if the field position battle becomes a struggle.

Going back to the schedule here, Illinois has eight home games. Arizona State, Northwestern, Ohio State, Michigan, and Wisconsin all have to visit Champaign. Not only that, but the Fighting Illini dodge playing Iowa, Michigan State and Nebraska, arguably the three best teams from the Legends Division. With Penn State being the toughest road game – and

keep in mind Illinois won at Penn State last season by 20 points – anything less than 7-8 wins might not be enough for Zook to keep his job. Simply put, he has to build off the success (albeit small) Illinois did have a year ago, something he didn't do in 2008 following a Rose Bowl appearance.

There might be any reason to pick Illinois to win the Leaders Division in 2011, but there's certainly no reason to think this team can't be in the thick of things, especially with the schedule in front of it.

[Illinois CB Tavon Wilson](#)