

2011 Big Ten football previews: Wisconsin (premium)

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After examining [Ohio State](#) and [Illinois](#), the next Big Ten team we will preview is the Wisconsin Badgers. Iowa will not play Wisconsin in 2011.

It's a good time right now for Badger fans. Wisconsin is coming off an 11-2 season where it was co-Big Ten champions, and having won the Big Ten's three-way tiebreaker last season being the highest-ranked BCS team, the Badgers were the league's participant in the Rose Bowl, where they lost 21-19 to an undefeated TCU squad.

Wisconsin is the favorite to win the Leaders Division this season, and in my opinion, it's rightfully so. Throw in there the issues going on at Ohio State and the uncertainty that will eventually arise at Penn State whenever Joe Paterno is no longer coaching, and I got to say, the Badgers are in a great position right now to really have an early stranglehold on this division for the years to come.

That's for another post down the road, though. Here, I'm going to focus on the 2011 version of Wisconsin, which loses some key players from an obviously talented 2010 squad, but pieces are in place.

The reason I like Wisconsin to at the very least win the Leaders is because of the quarterback position. Yes, Scott Tolzien is gone. But the Badgers managed to land Russell Wilson, who had previously played at North Carolina State. Because Wilson already graduated from North Carolina State, he was allowed to transfer to Wisconsin and will be eligible to

play as a senior this season. This move, in my opinion, is where the Badgers separated themselves.

Say what you will about the ACC being subpar in comparison to the Big Ten, but considering the inexperience that was there following Tolzien's departure, this is a bold move by Wisconsin head coach Bret Bielema that I see paying dividends. Wilson threw 28 touchdown passes and had an additional nine touchdown runs for the Wolfpack last season, and led North Carolina State to a 23-7 win over West Virginia in the Champs Sports Bowl.

Bielema claims there's a competition, but let's be honest. Wilson will start because he gives the Badgers a dimension at quarterback that quite frankly, they haven't had in a long time.

Even with Wilson at the helm however, the strength of this Wisconsin offense has been and will continue to be its ground game. Yes, John Clay left early for the NFL, but senior Montee Ball and sophomore James White both return to the Badger backfield in 2011. White led the team in rushing as a true freshman with 1,052 yards and 14 touchdowns. Meanwhile, Ball had 996 rushing yards in 2010, but also led the Big Ten in rushing touchdowns with 18 of them. That's 32 rushing touchdowns coming back this fall.

Wilson won't have the luxury of throwing to guys like David Gilreath or Lance Kendricks, but senior wide receiver Nick Toon returns and will likely play a bigger role in the Badger offense. Although he only played in nine games last season, Toon was Wisconsin's second-leading receiver with 36 catches for 459 yards and three touchdowns. Sophomore Jared Abbrederis is expected to take Gilreath's spot after catching 20 passes for 289 yards and three touchdowns last season, while senior tight end Jake Byrne will succeed Kendricks attempt to follow in a decent line of Badger tight ends to play under Bielema.

Up front, the Badgers do return three offensive linemen. However, the two they lost were Gabe Carimi and John Moffitt and both played on the left side of the line. In fact, Carimi won the Outland Trophy in 2010 and was a first-round draft choice of the Chicago Bears. However, the size of the Badger O-line remains remarkable. Senior right guard Kevin Zietler, who started the last nine games of 2010, is listed at 6-4, 315 pounds. He's the shortest and lightest of the five linemen expected to start in 2011.

The D-line returns three starters, but much like the offensive line, the one they lost is quite significant. Gone is defensive end J.J. Watt, a first-round pick of the Houston Texans. All he did last season was record 62 tackles (42 solo, 21 for loss of yardage), seven sacks, force three fumbles, recover two fumbles, and block three kicks. Simply put, Watt was the face of the Wisconsin defense in 2010.

This year's group is led by a pair of seniors – defensive end Louis Nzegwu and defensive tackle Patrick Butrym. Nzegwu comes off a season where he had 46 tackles and three sacks, while Butrym recorded 28 tackles and 2.5 sacks.

Junior linebacker Mike Taylor is the lone returning starter from Wisconsin's linebacking corps, but his 58 tackles last season, which was fourth on the team, is the highest among any returning Badgers, and he also had two interceptions in 2010.

Wisconsin's two best defensive backs statistically last season return in 2011 to lead the Badger secondary. Senior cornerback Antonio Fenelus led Wisconsin with four interceptions and also had 56 tackles and two fumble recoveries to boot, while senior safety Aaron Henry had 58 tackles, two interceptions and three fumble recoveries.

On special teams, the Badgers bring back both punter Brad Nortman, who averaged 42.7 yards per punt in 2010, and kicker Phillip Welch, who was 17-of-22 with field goals and a perfect

67-of-67 on PAT tries. However, with Gilreath gone, a new return man will need to be established.

For the second year in a row, I feel Wisconsin's schedule really comes down to a pair of consecutive October games. Last season, the Badgers beat both Ohio State and Iowa, which I felt propelled them to Pasadena. Wisconsin opens Big Ten play at Camp Randall Stadium against Nebraska on Oct. 1, and should the Badgers beat the Cornhuskers, they'll likely be 6-0 entering a stretch of five games where four of them are played away from Madison. The first two are Oct. 22 at Michigan State, who beat Wisconsin last season, and Oct. 29 at Ohio State. Both are primetime games.

If the Badgers split these games, they should still be in good shape to win the Leaders Division. If they were to somehow leave both East Lansing and Columbus with victories, Wisconsin could potentially be entering the Big Ten Championship Game on Dec. 3 undefeated. And with all due respect to Penn State here, the Badgers are absolutely winning this division if they win at Ohio State. With Penn State traveling to Camp Randall Stadium on Nov. 26, I can't see Wisconsin losing that one at home.

This season has a similar make-up to 2010, and if the Badgers are able to take advantage, they're not only going to see short-term success, but also long-term.

[Wisconsin WR Nick Toon](#)