

2011 Big Ten football previews: Purdue (premium)

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After discussing [Ohio State](#), [Illinois](#), [Wisconsin](#), and [Indiana](#), the next Big Ten team I will spend time focusing on is the Purdue Boilermakers. Iowa will visit Ross-Ade Stadium in West Lafayette, Ind., on Nov. 19.

I thought Purdue could have had a decent squad in 2010, but injuries ravished this program perhaps more than anybody else in the Big Ten. The Boilermakers ended up with a 4-8 mark, but it began 4-2 before they lost their final six games, including heartbreakers to Michigan State and Indiana.

One thing head coach Danny Hope has said that I do agree with is this year's team is his most talented since he took over in 2009 in place of Joe Tiller. I'll expand more on this thought a little later, but as far as opportunity goes, Purdue has a chance to really impress early and I think the Boilermakers will need to in order to reach their first bowl in four seasons.

One area that will need to be better in 2011 is the offense. While this side of the ball is where injuries impacted Purdue the most, it still averaged a conference-worst 19.7 points per game last year. The Boilermakers also had the worst numbers in the Big Ten in 2010 in terms of passing yards (1,809), number of plays called (796), total yards (3,739), yards per game (311.6), and touchdowns scored (25). This is over the course of a 12-game season.

The story with Purdue this season is the two-quarterback system Hope said would be used. Last season, Robert Marve came

in after transferring from Miami (Fla.) and looked to be the guy for the Boilermakers. He started Purdue's first four games before an ACL injury ended up sidelining him the rest of 2010. In stepped Rob Henry, who eventually started six of the Boilermakers' last eight games. Henry, who will be a sophomore, has beat out the senior Marve as the starter for Purdue's opener against Middle Tennessee State on Sept. 3, but Hope made clear both signal-callers would be used this year.

In four games, Marve completed 67-of-99 passes for three touchdowns and four interceptions, while Henry threw for 996 yards while appearing in 11 games and finished his freshman season with eight touchdown passes and seven picks. But what might be even more frightening is that Henry led Purdue in rushing last year with 547 yards rushing and four touchdowns on 104 carries. Again, he was the quarterback.

And yes, the biggest issues the Boilermakers had last season were with the backfield. A knee injury sidelined Ralph Bolden for all of 2010, and as a result, Purdue wound up starting six different players at running back, including Henry. Seeing how Bolden started all 12 games at running back in 2009 and appears to be back healthy, the junior probably has the best chance of starting this season. If Bolden can stay healthy, that will be of enormous benefit for Purdue's offense.

The receiving corps suffered a major blow when Keith Smith suffered a season-ending injury two games into 2010. Of the Boilermakers' returning playmakers, junior wideout Antavian Edison put up the best numbers last season, catching 32 passes for 316 receiving yards and a team-high four touchdowns. Also being asked to step up will be senior Justin Siller, who originally committed to Purdue as a quarterback, and sophomore O.J. Ross. The Boilermakers will also need to find a tight end to replace Kyle Adams, who wound up leading the team in receiving last year.

One area where cohesion was developed in 2010, however, was up

front. The good news for Purdue here is that four players who started last season along the offensive line are back for 2011. Senior left tackle Dennis Kelly, junior center Peters Drey, and senior right tackle Nick Mondek started all 12 games at their respective positions for the Boilermakers last year. Purdue also returns senior guard Ken Plue, who started 10 games last year, but comes in listed at 358 pounds according to the team's media guide.

With the defensive line, Purdue's situation is similar to Wisconsin's. On one hand, the Boilermakers return three starters up front. However, the one loss was the Big Ten's Defensive Player of the Year, Ryan Kerrigan. The defensive end led the conference in 2010 with 12.5 sacks to go with his 70 tackles, and he was a first-round pick of the Washington Redskins.

This year's group will be led by junior defensive tackle Kawann Short, who recorded 41 tackles (30 solo) and six sacks as a sophomore. Also returning are senior defensive end Gerald Gooden and sophomore defensive tackle Bruce Gaston.

In the back seven, Purdue returns six starters, including the entire secondary. The two linebackers who are back were the second and third-leading tacklers on the team in 2010 – junior middle linebacker Dwayne Beckford, and senior outside linebacker Joe Holland. Beckford compiled 84 tackles, while Holland is coming off a year where he finished with 73.

Leading the secondary are a pair of senior safeties, as well as a junior and sophomore at the corner spots. Sophomore cornerback Ricardo Allen was the lone Boilermaker to record multiple interceptions in 2010, tallying three picks to go with his 73 tackles, 56 of which were unassisted. Senior strong safety Logan Link was Purdue's leading tackler and was eighth in the Big Ten with 91 tackles. Junior cornerback Josh Johnson and senior free safety Albert Evans combined to force five fumbles, which was as many as Kerrigan forced by himself.

With nine returning starters, Purdue will be heavily dependent on the play of its defense.

Then there's special teams, and it's safe to say the Boilermakers have the conference's best kicker in senior Carson Wiggs. As a junior, he was 15-of-19 on field goal attempts, with one of the misses coming from 56 yards, as well as a made attempt from 52 yards in a game against Michigan State. Wiggs also made all 27 extra-point attempts he had, and even handled 22 punts, with nine of those 22 punts landing inside the opponent's 20-yard line.

During Purdue's spring game, Wiggs got a chance to show off his leg and made a 67-yard field goal. He's been recognized as one of the most important leaders on the Boilermakers this season, and he might just be their most valuable player to boot.

Two questions arise here: How much better can the offense be with some healthy bodies back, and how good will a defense sans Kerrigan look? Schedule-wise, Purdue has a decent schedule, especially early on. The only non-conference game of enormous concern is Oct. 1 against Notre Dame, and that game's at Ross-Ade Stadium. The Boilermakers also open Big Ten play against Minnesota, so right there is a chance for four wins out of the gate.

I think Purdue can win five games for sure – every non-conference game sans Notre Dame, Minnesota at home, and the finale at Indiana. Now where's the sixth win coming? Purdue also plays Illinois, Ohio State and Iowa at home, while traveling to Penn State, Michigan and Wisconsin. If the Boilermakers can win one of these six Big Ten games, then that's 6-6 and bowl eligibility, which wouldn't be a bad thing in Year #3 under Hope.

[Purdue K Carson Wiggs](#)