

2011 Big Ten football previews: Penn State (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

After examining [Ohio State](#), [Illinois](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Indiana](#), and [Purdue](#), we now take time to discuss the upcoming 2011 season for the Penn State Nittany Lions. Iowa visits Beaver Stadium in State College, Pa., on Oct. 8.

At first glance, Penn State looks like a team that could either be really good or really average in 2011. Last season, the Nittany Lions ended up being an average team. Even though there wasn't really a bad loss, 7-6 with a loss to Florida in the Outback Bowl isn't how many at Penn State envisioned 2010 going.

The questions that surrounded this program near the end of last season are still lingering this fall. Joe Paterno returns for his 46th season roaming the Penn State sidelines, but the question of how many more years he has left still exists. Two weeks from the start of the 2011 campaign, the Nittany Lions are still unsettled at quarterback. These are just two of the topics being heavily discussed in State College right now.

Right now, the quarterback battle is between sophomore Rob Bolden and junior Matt McGloin. Bolden started the first seven games of 2010 as a true freshman, becoming the first Penn State signal-caller to ever do that. Bolden got injured during the Nittany Lions' 33-21 win over Minnesota, and McGloin finished that game out and started the following week in a win over Michigan. Bolden started Penn State's victory over Northwestern, but was benched in favor of McGloin, who started

the final three regular season games and the Outback Bowl loss to Florida.

Bolden completed 112-of-193 pass attempts for 1,360 yards through the air, but tossed only five touchdowns to seven interceptions. McGloin was 118-of-215 for 1,548 passing yards, 14 touchdowns and nine interceptions. However, five of those nine interceptions came in the Outback Bowl. Personally, I feel Penn State is better off in the long-term with Bolden, simply because there's still potential for him to grow as a quarterback while you mostly know what you're getting in McGloin.

The backfield took a hit this week when Paterno revealed that senior running back Stephfon Green wasn't with the team during fall camp. This, on top of Penn State already losing its all-time leading rusher in Evan Royster.

Enter Silas Redd. The sophomore appeared in 12 games for the Nittany Lions last season and had 77 carries for 437 rushing yards and a pair of touchdowns. Given the uncertainty at quarterback, Redd might be poised for a breakout season, and I would expect he's going to play a big part in Penn State's offense this season.

The receiving corps is led by senior wideout Derek Moya, who emerged as the Nittany Lions' go-to playmaker during the second half of the season. Moya finished with 53 catches for 855 receiving yards and eight touchdowns. He had at least one touchdown catch in seven of Penn State's final eight games, with seven of his eight touchdown receptions accounting for exactly half of McGloin's touchdown passes in 2010.

However, the Nittany Lions are going to need other receivers to step up in 2011. Junior wideouts Justin Brown and Devon Smith had 33 and 27 receptions last season, respectively. Those numbers will have to increase for them both, or Penn State could have its struggles offensively, regardless of who

is under center.

Up front, three seniors that started last season return – tackles Quinn Barham and Chima Okoli, and guard Johnnie Troutman. However, the loss of Stefan Wisniewski hurts. Wisniewski was one of few bright spots for Penn State in 2010, being named first-team all-American during a season where he started every game at right guard after starting every game at center in 2009.

The D-line lost defensive tackle Ollie Ogbu, who had 48 tackles for the Nittany Lions last season. Penn State also took a hit here back in the spring with defensive end Pete Massaro tearing his left ACL, an injury that will sideline him for the entire 2011 season. Senior defensive tackle Devon Still is the most veteran player returning after coming off a season where he led the Nittany Lions with four sacks in addition to his 39 tackles.

As for the linebacking corps, gone is Chris Colasanti, who was Penn State's leading tackler in 2010 recording 112 of them. Two familiar names are back for "Linebacker U," however. Senior linebacker Nate Stupar is coming off a season where he had 73 tackles, two sacks and an interception, while junior linebacker Michael Mauti had 67 tackles and two sacks. Both will be counted on to lead Penn State's defense.

The good news defensively is with the secondary, which returns all three of its key playmakers from 2010. Senior safety Nick Sukay is back after having his junior season cut short when he tore a pectoral muscle in Penn State's 33-13 loss to Illinois. Prior to the injury, he had 29 tackles and three interceptions.

The "hero" spot in the secondary will once again be held down by senior safety Drew Astorino, who had 70 tackles and broke up five passes last season. Also returning is senior cornerback D'Anton Lynn, who was second on the team in tackles

with 75, and tied Sukay with a team-high three interceptions.

With special teams, it looks as though sophomore punter Anthony Fera might be handling both punting and kicking duties in 2011. Fera had 46 punts in 2010, with an average of 41.4 yards per punt. Assuming he handles field goals and PATs, he replaces Collin Wagner, who had proven to be a reliable kicker throughout his career for Penn State.

Now for the schedule. To me, it boils down to the Nittany Lions' game against Iowa on Oct. 8, which will be played at Beaver Stadium. Penn State will more than likely be 4-1 entering that contest (the one loss likely coming Sept. 10 at home against Alabama). The Nittany Lions' last three games of 2011 consist of the following: Nebraska at home, at Ohio State, at Wisconsin.

Beat Iowa for the first time since 2007, and it wouldn't surprise me one bit if Penn State enters its home finale against the Cornhuskers with an overall record of 8-1 and a Big Ten mark of 5-0. If this happens, I feel the Nittany Lions have a chance of winning 1-2 of these remaining three games, which could conceivably punch them a ticket to the Big Ten Championship Game in Indianapolis on Dec. 3.

With that being said, should Penn State lose to Iowa for the fourth year in a row and enter that Nebraska showdown with a 7-2 or 6-3 record, the best case scenario suddenly looks like 7-5, which is what the Nittany Lions were prior to losing the 2011 Outback Bowl.

One last thought here on Penn State: If that first scenario comes to fruition, then I could see this possibly being Paterno's last year. The positions of strength on both sides of the ball are pretty much dominated by seniors, and the schedule sets up favorably with Alabama, Iowa, and Nebraska all visiting Beaver Stadium before those last two road challenges. It probably won't be Paterno's final season, but

this is all worth keeping in mind should Penn State have a big year.

[Penn State LB Michael Mauti](#)