

# 2011 Big Ten football previews: Minnesota (premium)

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After previewing the Big Ten's Leaders Division consisting of [Ohio State](#), [Illinois](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Indiana](#), [Purdue](#), and [Penn State](#), our first look at the Legends Division features the Minnesota Golden Gophers. Iowa will make its second consecutive trip to TCF Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, Minn., on Oct. 29.

There wasn't much to be thrilled about in Minnesota last year. Sure, the Golden Gophers won their final two games of the season, including a 27-24 victory over Iowa that brought Floyd of Rosedale back to the Twin Cities. But a 3-9 season that featured a loss at home to South Dakota and Tim Brewster being fired after starting the year 1-6 showed a program that hit rock bottom in 2010.

Now the Golden Gophers have a new head coach in Jerry Kill, a man who came from Northern Illinois and wasn't boasting over Big Ten and national championships won in the 1930s, but rather how he would make the present a better situation in Minnesota. Personally, I think Minnesota made a solid hire here considering what it had before with Brewster.

While I think Kill will eventually bring success that at the very least compares to what Glen Mason accomplished, this first year will be a challenge. Minnesota finds itself in the more competitive of the two Big Ten divisions, one where all of the other five teams either are ranked or received votes in the preseason AP Top 25 poll.

Offensively, the biggest change will be at quarterback. After

four seasons of Adam Weber starting every game, the reigns are finally being handed over to junior MarQueis Gray. While he has taken snaps as Minnesota's signal-caller before, Gray was used primarily as a wide receiver last year. As a sophomore, caught 42 passes for 587 receiving yards and five touchdowns, finishing second to wideout Da'Jon McKnight in all three categories in 2010.

Gray being under center allows other wide receivers to work their way up, as well as give him the opportunity to play the position he was originally brought in to play.

The backfield lost a pair of contributors from last season in leading rusher DeLeon Eskridge and fullback Jon Hoese. The feature back in Minnesota's offense this season looks to be senior Duane Bennett, who had 529 yards rushing on 123 carries and three touchdowns last season. Bennett was also fourth on the Golden Gophers in receptions, hauling in 33 catches.

Minnesota's receiving corps is a bit inexperienced, especially with Gray switching back to quarterback. However, McKnight returns for his senior year after posting team-highs of 48 catches, 750 yards receiving, and 10 touchdowns. Make no mistake, this will and should be Gray's go-to target whenever he does drop back to pass. The Golden Gophers also return senior tight end Eric Lair, who had 39 catches for 526 yards receiving and two touchdowns, all of which were third on the team to McKnight and Gray.

The offensive line loses three starters from 2010, two of which started all 12 games. However, the left side of the line is back with sophomore Ed Olson at left tackle, and senior Chris Bunders at left guard, a position he started every game at last season. The big question will be who starts at right tackle, a spot that could very well be occupied by a redshirt freshman in 2011.

Minnesota's offense was pretty anemic in 2010, but the defense

was just as awful. How awful? The Golden Gophers surrendered 50 touchdowns last year, including 29 rushing touchdowns, most of any team in the Big Ten. In fact, opponents were 40-of-44 inside the red zone, with 33 of those 40 scores resulting in touchdowns. Minnesota also gave up more third-down and fourth-down conversions percentage wise of any Big Ten team, and also had a league-low nine sacks. That's not even one sack per game.

As terrible as the Golden Gophers were defensively, however, eight starters return in 2011 with a chance to redeem themselves under the guidance of defensive coordinator Tracy Claeys, who followed Kill to Minnesota from Northern Illinois.

Senior defensive tackle Anthony Jacobs is one of three returning starters along the defensive line, and was fifth on the team with 41 tackles, and second with two of Minnesota's nine sacks in 2010. Also back are senior defensive tackle Brandon Kirksey and junior defensive end D.L. Wilhite. Kirksey had 28 tackles last season, while Wilhite had 14 tackles and a sack.

All three linebackers are back, including senior Gary Tinsley, who led the Golden Gophers last year with 90 tackles. However, Tinsley has some competition right now at that middle linebacker spot. Sophomore linebacker Brendan Beal was a highly-touted recruit that originally signed a letter of intent to play at Florida in 2009, but following a redshirt season, Beal transferred to Minnesota. In 2008, he was named Gatorade High School Player of the Year in his home state of Pennsylvania.

As for the rest of the linebacking corps, Minnesota brings back a pair of juniors in Keanon Cooper and Mike Rallis. Cooper's 68 tackles last year was third on the team, while Rallis recorded 37 tackles and led the Golden Gophers with three interceptions.

The secondary brings back a pair of seniors in cornerback Troy Stoudermire and safety Kim Royston, who missed all of 2010 with a broken leg and was granted a sixth year of eligibility by the NCAA. In 2009, Royston started every game for Minnesota and finished the year with 86 tackles, 15 of which came in the Golden Gophers' 14-13 loss to Iowa State in the 2009 Insight Bowl. Stoudermire, meanwhile, had 37 tackles last season and led the team with five pass break-ups. He is also Minnesota's biggest weapon on special teams, mainly as a kickoff returner. Stoudermire had 789 yards on 29 kickoff returns, good for third in the Big Ten last year.

While the Golden Gophers were decent in the return game, the rest of their special teams was bad. Sophomore punter Dan Orseske returns following a season where his 36.1 yards per punt was a Big Ten low. Minnesota also has a new kicker in sophomore Chris Hawthorne.

Now the schedule doesn't do the Golden Gophers any favors. Right away, they open the season on the road against a USC squad that beat Minnesota at TCF Bank Stadium last year, 32-21. After that, the Golden Gophers play three straight at home, but Miami (Ohio) won the MAC last year, and North Dakota State beat Minnesota back in 2007, which was Brewster's first season.

If there's any good news here for the Golden Gophers, it's that Nebraska, Iowa and Wisconsin all have to visit TCF Bank Stadium this season. However, road games against division rivals Michigan, Michigan State and Northwestern will prove daunting. They also play at Purdue for the second straight year and closes the 2011 season with a home game against Illinois.

Again, I think Kill will turn out to be a good hire for Minnesota over time. The Golden Gophers might even win a game or two they probably shouldn't have any business winning. But this season just looks to be a bit too difficult, and an

immediate turnaround would be asking too much of Kill in his first year at the helm.

[Minnesota QB MarQueis Gray](#)