

2011 Big Ten football previews: Northwestern (premium)

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After examining [Ohio State](#), [Illinois](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Indiana](#), [Purdue](#), [Penn State](#), and [Minnesota](#), we now shift our attention to the Northwestern Wildcats. Iowa will play Northwestern on Oct. 15 at Kinnick Stadium.

If there's one Big Ten team that truly fits the description of a "dark horse" candidate to compete for a conference crown in 2011, the place to look just might be Evanston, Ill.

The more I've thought about Northwestern as the season is now less than two weeks from starting, the more I feel like this team is capable of surprising some folks. Now granted, the Legends Division is going to be far from a cake walk for any of the five teams that have a legitimate chance of winning the division, and the Wildcats might very well be the fifth-best of those five teams. But that's not a bad thing.

One thing head coach Pat Fitzgerald will have going for his program is experience. Northwestern returns nine starters on offense, including senior quarterback Dan Persa, and seven starters on defense. Add in that the schedule isn't extremely daunting, and the Wildcats are, at the very least, probably going to reach a fourth straight bowl game in 2011.

I mentioned Persa, and quite honestly, he's the key to Northwestern's season. Last season, he ruptured his Achilles' tendon right after throwing the game-winning touchdown in a 21-17 victory over Iowa. After that happened, the Wildcats

went into a tail spin and lost three straight games to close the season, including a 45-38 loss to Texas Tech in the inaugural TicketCity Bowl.

As Persa goes, this team will go. He is the heart and soul. Physically, he looks to be back on track. Now it's all mental. If Persa is as close to 100 percent as he'll be following that injury and can be the quarterback many around the program think he'll be, then this could be a terrific season for Northwestern.

Prior to the injury, Persa had thrown for 2,581 yards and tossed 15 touchdowns to just four interceptions. In fact, his 73.5% completion percentage led the Big Ten. He also was the Wildcats' second-leading rusher with 519 yards on the ground and led the team with nine rushing touchdowns. Only Michigan's Denard Robinson accounted for more yards of total offense per game in the Big Ten last season than Persa. That right there should tell you how valuable he was and will be again in 2011.

The rest of Northwestern's backfield all returns, which includes a trio of sophomores and senior Jacob Schmidt who rushed for four touchdowns last season. The leader of this group will likely be sophomore running back Mike Trumphy, who led the Wildcats with 530 yards rushing and four touchdowns on the ground in 2010.

Now here's what should excite Wildcat fans – wide receiver Jeremy Ebert is back for his senior year. All Ebert did last season was lead the Big Ten with 953 receiving yards. He also caught 62 passes and scored eight touchdowns, so the argument for him being the conference's best wideout has plenty of merit to it.

Also coming back are senior superback Drake Dunsmore and junior wide receiver Demetrius Fields. Dunsmore was third on the Wildcats with 381 receiving yards, was tied for second with 40 receptions, and was second to Ebert with five

touchdown catches last year. Fields had 25 catches for 291 yards receiving and a pair of touchdowns.

As if that isn't enough, Northwestern also returns four starters along the offensive line, all of whom started every game at their respective positions in 2010. The one replacement will likely be senior Doug Bartels at right guard, a position he actually started the first three games of last season at. Outside of that though, senior left tackle Al Netter, junior left guard Brian Mulroe, senior center Ben Burkett, and junior right tackle Patrick Ward are four reasons why the Wildcats could have a very productive offense this fall.

The front four on defense loses one pretty valuable starter from last year in defensive tackle Corbin Bryant, but the other three starters all return. Leading this group is defensive end Vince Browne. His seven sacks in 2010 were a team-high, and he finished tied for second in the Big Ten in sacks along with Wisconsin's J.J. Watt. Browne also had 58 tackles, and his 15.5 tackles for loss were third in the conference behind Watt and Purdue's Ryan Kerrigan.

Of the two areas where Northwestern is most depleted, one is the linebacking corps. The Wildcats lose their second- and third-leading tacklers from a season ago, but returning is senior Bryce McNaul, who was fifth on the team last year with 62 tackles. Senior linebacker Ben Johnson and junior David Nwabuisi are expected to fill the voids left by Nate Williams and Quentin Davie.

The secondary loses one corner from 2010 – Justan Vaughn. Coming back in 2011 are a trio of seniors in cornerback Jordan Mabin and safeties Brian Peters and David Arnold. Mabin led the Big Ten with 14 pass break ups last season to go with his 63 tackles. Peters led Northwestern with 107 tackles, 65 of which were unassisted. His 107 tackles was fifth among Big Ten players last year. He also tied Davie for a team-high three

interceptions.

On special teams, sophomore Brandon Williams returns at punter following a freshman season where he punted 61 times and averaged 40 yards per punt. But the big question will be at kicker with Stefan Demos no longer around. Right now, there's a competition between sophomore Jeff Budzien and junior Steve Flaherty for all of the kicking duties. The Wildcats also has a new long snapper this year in sophomore Pat Hickey.

Northwestern has to play six of its first nine games on the road before finishing with three straight at Ryan Field, but with that in mind, the schedule is manageable. The Wildcats don't play Ohio State or Wisconsin this season, and Penn State has to make a trip to Evanston for the third of three straight night games. Now there are two road games out of conference in September against Boston College on Sept. 3 and Army on Sept. 17, both of whom played in bowls last year. But neither are games that Northwestern can't win.

In the division, Michigan and Michigan State both visit Ryan Field, while the Wildcats have road games against both Iowa and Nebraska. I go back to what I said earlier here – Northwestern might very well finish fifth in the Legends Division this season, but it's not as though the four teams that could finish ahead of them are significantly better. Not to mention the Wildcats have won five of their last six meetings with the Hawkeyes.

With all this experience returning on both sides, I don't think there's any doubt of this year's squad being the best Fitzgerald has assembled since taking over in 2006. But again, it all goes back to Persa. His absence at the end of last year not only impacted the offense, but the defense surrendered a total of 163 points in the three games he missed. If he manages to stay healthy and has another productive season, then Northwestern fans will have reason to be optimistic in 2011.

Northwestern QB Dan Persa