

2011 Big Ten football previews: Michigan (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

Thus far in our Big Ten season preview series, we have discussed [Ohio State](#), [Illinois](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Indiana](#), [Purdue](#), [Penn State](#), [Minnesota](#) and [Northwestern](#). We now turn our attention to the Michigan Wolverines. Iowa will play against Michigan on Nov. 5 at Kinnick Stadium.

Following a disastrous performance in the 2011 Gator Bowl against Mississippi State, Michigan let go of Rich Rodriguez and brought in Brady Hoke from San Diego State to replace him. Simply put, it just didn't work for Rodriguez in Ann Arbor. I never really got the sense he was embraced by the Michigan community, and while the Wolverines did reach a bowl game last year, there was never that feeling they weren't improving, especially on defense.

Hoke came in, and quite frankly, he fits more of the mold of past Michigan coaches. He has ties to the program, having been an assistant for eight seasons under Lloyd Carr, including the 1997 season when the Wolverines were co-national champions. From hearing him talk, I feel like Michigan made the right hire here. It might not show in wins and losses this season, but I really think the future might be bright for this program under Hoke.

The Wolverines also have new coordinators. Commanding the offense now is offensive coordinator Al Borges, and the talk has been of Michigan converting from a spread team under Rodriguez to now being more pro-style under Hoke. With this in mind, the big question will be how this affects junior quarterback Denard Robinson.

Last season, Robinson was the Big Ten's Offensive Player of the Year and deservedly so. He led the Big Ten in rushing, as a quarterback mind you, and accounted for 32 Michigan touchdowns in 2010. The one positive I think this switch of offensive schemes does is make it so he's less prone to get knocked out of games later in the season when the Wolverines face more physical defenses.

One point Hoke made sure to make regarding Robinson's adjustment was that he had played in this type of offense in high school prior to signing on with Rodriguez at Michigan. Regardless, this is a transition that will be worth watching.

The Wolverines have a battle ongoing at running back between senior Michael Shaw and junior Vincent Smith. Shaw started the first four games of last season before Smith ended up starting eight of the last nine contests. Smith had 601 rushing yards to Shaw's 402 yards, but Shaw had nine touchdowns on the ground, while Smith had five.

Michigan's receiving corps took a hit earlier this month when it was announced that senior wideout Darryl Stonum would be redshirting this season as part of a punishment for a second DUI. Stonum was second on the Wolverines in receiving last year with 49 catches, 633 yards and four touchdowns. Robinson will still have junior Roy Roundtree and senior Junior Hemingway as receiving weapons.

Roundtree led Michigan with 72 receptions, 935 receiving yards and seven touchdowns, while Hemingway was third on the team with 32 catches, 593 receiving yards and four touchdowns. Hemingway will need to play a bigger role with Stonum out. Also returning is tight end Kevin Koger, who had 14 catches last season, two of which were touchdowns.

Up front, the Wolverines have three offensive linemen returning, including senior center David Molk. However, Michigan also have a massive void to fill at left guard, which

had been occupied by Stephen Schilling.

Now as for the defense, well, it was bad. The Wolverines had the second-worst rush defense and worst pass defense in the Big Ten last season, and it only got worse as the season progressed. The end result was Greg Robinson being shown the door, and Hoke bringing in former Florida defensive coordinator Greg Mattison to take over the defense. Mattison was on Urban Meyer's staff when the Gators won the 2007 BCS National Championship Game over Ohio State, so one would think this is an enormous upgrade Michigan has made defensively.

The defensive line brings back a pair of tackles in seniors Ryan Van Bergen and Mike Martin. Both recorded 37 tackles each for the Wolverines in 2010, with Van Bergen recording four sacks to 2.5 sacks for Martin. This duo of D-linemen will be counted on to help revamp Michigan's defense.

At linebacker, the Wolverines need to find a replacement for Jonas Mouton, who led the Big Ten last season with 117 tackles. However, Michigan does bring back junior Kenny Demens and sophomore Cam Gordon, who were third and fourth respectively on the Wolverines in tackles last year. Demens finished with 82 tackles, while Gordon had 77 tackles and tied for team-highs with three interceptions, four pass break ups, and two fumble recoveries.

The secondary brings back the team's second-leading tackler from last year in junior strong safety Jordan Kovacs, who had 116 tackles, two interceptions and a sack. Junior cornerback J.T. Floyd and sophomore cornerback Courtney Avery both had four pass break ups for the Wolverines. However, the biggest story might be the return of senior cornerback Troy Woolfolk, who redshirted last season due to an ankle injury. Prior to getting hurt, Woolfolk had 46 tackles as a junior in 2009, starting at both corner and safety.

Sophomore punter Will Hagerup returns, but is suspended for

the Wolverines' first four games of 2011. Last season, Hagerup recorded 33 punts, averaging 43.6 yards per punt. Michigan still needs to figure out its kicking situation as well as sophomores Seth Broekhuizen and Brendan Gibbons kicked a combined 4-of-14 with field goal attempts.

Michigan has a decent schedule this year, mainly because the Wolverines get to play eight games in The Big House, including their first five games of the season. The non-conference slate is highlighted by No. 16 Notre Dame coming to Ann Arbor for the first night game Michigan has ever played in The Big House, and Hoke's former school, San Diego State, visits on Sept. 24. In the Big Ten, Michigan has a stretch where it plays four road games over the course of a six-week span. However, the last two games are both at home against Nebraska and Ohio State, which will be as intriguing as ever now with Luke Fickell taking over as the Buckeyes' coach.

I think the Wolverines are a bowl team again. As long as Robinson can stay healthy at quarterback, Michigan should be fine. The defense has to obviously improve as well. I don't see the Wolverines winning what is a stacked Legends Division this season, especially with three of the four road games being Northwestern, Michigan State and Iowa. But Hoke will light a fire under this team that frankly wasn't there before, and I think 2012 is a year where Michigan could seriously be a threat to win the Big Ten assuming it takes the proper steps this season.

[Michigan QB Denard Robinson](#)