

2011 Big Ten football previews: Nebraska (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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We've discussed [Ohio State](#), [Illinois](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Indiana](#), [Purdue](#), [Penn State](#), [Minnesota](#), [Northwestern](#), [Michigan](#) and [Michigan State](#). Now our attention shifts to the Big Ten's newest member, the No. 10 Nebraska Cornhuskers. Iowa will play Nebraska in the inaugural "Heroes Game" at Memorial Stadium in Lincoln, Neb., on Nov. 25.

When I look at Nebraska, I see a team that's ready to fit in the Big Ten right from the get-go. The Cornhuskers have a head coach in Bo Pelini that played at Ohio State and was a graduate assistant for Hayden Fry at Iowa, so it's not as if he's unfamiliar with the conference. Nebraska will also have had 15 months to prepare for its official transition from the Big 12 to the Big Ten.

Some people say the Cornhuskers are in for a rude awakening when they start playing conference games, and maybe that's the case to a degree. I also believe, however, the opposite effect takes place as well. Big Ten teams will have to also adjust to Nebraska. The hype I see around this team right now is pretty legitimate. Despite a rough end to 2010, the Cornhuskers came awfully close to winning the Big 12. They were also a Texas field goal away from winning the Big 12 two years ago.

Returning at quarterback is sophomore Taylor Martinez, who took the Big 12 by storm during the early portion of last season before inconsistency reared its head towards the latter part of the year. Martinez completed 116-of-196 passes for a meager 1,631 yards with 10 touchdowns and seven interceptions.

However, his impact came on the ground, as he was the Cornhuskers' second-leading rusher with 965 yards and led the team with 12 rushing touchdowns. With Tim Beck being promoted from running backs coach to offensive coordinator/quarterbacks coach, I would expect Martinez to be used even more for his running abilities in 2011.

The reason why I say that is because of what else Nebraska has in the backfield. The Cornhuskers lost leading rusher Roy Helu, Jr., who had 1,245 yards and 11 touchdowns on the ground in 2010. However, his departure now opens up more carries for junior running back Rex Burkhead, who did start two games for Nebraska last year and rushed for 951 yards and seven touchdowns. Again, the Cornhuskers will remain a more run-oriented team, which I believe plays to their strengths.

That doesn't mean Nebraska won't utilize the passing game, though. Although the Cornhuskers no longer have Niles Paul's services, the receiving corps brings back senior Brandon Kinnie. His 494 receiving yards were second to Paul, but he led the team with 44 receptions, five of which resulted in touchdowns. Also coming back is junior tight end Kyler Reed, who had 22 catches for 395 yards and led the Cornhuskers last season with eight touchdown receptions.

Now here's the biggest concern I have about Nebraska entering this 2011 season – the offensive line. Only two linemen, senior center Mike Caputo and sophomore left tackle Jeremiah Sirles, return after starting all 14 of the Cornhuskers' games last year. Senior tackle Marcel Jones is also back after starting 11 games in 2009 before injuries hampered 2010. Nebraska will need to have the guard positions straightened out though.

Switching over to defense, the Cornhuskers have the best defense in the Big Ten on paper, and it's not even close. I mentioned this last month following Big Ten Media Days, but it's worth reiterating: Any defense that consists of at least

one marquee player at all three levels is going to wreak havoc on opposing offenses. Nebraska has that here in 2011, and if you're wondering why so many see it as a favorite in the Legends Division, this is why.

Up front, the Cornhuskers return senior defensive tackle Jared Crick, who has been first-team all-Big 12 each of the past two seasons. He was a Big 12 first-team defensive tackle the same season he was paired inside with Ndamukong Suh. Think about that for a second. In 2010, Crick had 70 tackles and 9.5 sacks. His sacks would've been second in the Big Ten to Purdue's Ryan Kerrigan, who also recorded 70 tackles last season and was the 2010 Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year.

Nebraska also brings back a pair of juniors along the D-line in defensive tackle Baker Steinkuhler and defensive end Cameron Meredith. While the attention was on Crick, Steinkuhler had a decent 2010, recording 46 tackles and 3.5 sacks. Meredith was fifth on the Cornhuskers last season with 64 tackles, and also had 1.5 sacks.

The linebacking corps was ignited last year by Lavonte David, who returns for his senior season. David was a junior college transfer that in his first season as a Cornhusker led the Big 12 with 152 tackles. Just to put that into perspective, he had 35 more tackles than last year's Big Ten tackles leader, Michigan's Jonas Mouton. Expected to start alongside David at linebacker in 2011 are a pair of juniors – Will Compton and Sean Fisher.

As for the Nebraska secondary, there's good and bad news. The bad news is it no longer features Prince Amukamara after the shut-down corner was a first-round pick of the New York Giants last spring. However, senior cornerback Alfonzo Dennard might be just as good. Last season, Dennard had 30 tackles and seven pass break ups. He also led the Cornhusker defense with four interceptions this year. Opposing offenses won't throw his way as much in 2011, but his presence makes a difference. Nebraska

also brings back a pair of safeties in senior Austin Cassidy and junior Courtney Osbourne.

There is also a massive void with the special teams unit, as the Cornhuskers need to find a replacement for Alex Henery, who handled everything in 2010. Henery averaged 43.2 yards per punt, and was also 18-of-19 on field goal tries and a perfect 54-of-54 with PATs.

It's well-documented how challenging Nebraska's schedule is, particularly in Big Ten play. The Cornhuskers play their first three games in Lincoln, including a third meeting with Washington over the course of a calendar year, and finish non-conference with a trip to Wyoming. Right out of the gate, Nebraska plays at Wisconsin, then gets Ohio State at home when the suspended Buckeyes will all be back. Following a trip to Minnesota, the Cornhuskers get division foes Michigan State and Northwestern at home, then round out the season with games at Penn State, at Michigan, and the "Heroes Game" with Iowa on Nov. 25 at Memorial Stadium.

But as daunting as this schedule is, I believe there's enough in place for Nebraska that it has to be considered the favorite in the Legends Division this season. Will the Cornhuskers go undefeated? I highly doubt it. But three of the biggest competitors standing between them and a trip to Indianapolis all have to play at Nebraska this season. That, and I just feel teams in the Big Ten are going to have as hard, if not harder a time, trying to score on the Cornhusker defense as the Nebraska offense will have scoring in the Big Ten.

It's going to be very intriguing to watch, but if I had to pick today, there's enough reason to believe this is the team we see representing the Legends Division at Lucas Oil Stadium on Dec. 3.

[Nebraska LB Lavonte David](#)