

2011-12 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Ohio State (premium)

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HawkeyeDrive.com

The Big Ten kicks off its 2011-12 men's college basketball season next week, so this week, *HawkeyeDrive.com* will give you rundowns on all 12 conference teams. Today, we'll showcase [Nebraska](#) and Ohio State. The Buckeyes come into this season ranked third nationally and will only play Iowa once this season, with the meeting taking place on Jan. 7 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

Make no mistake about it. Coming off consecutive Big Ten crowns – both regular season and tournament – and consecutive appearances in the Sweet 16, and with some of its key players from last season back in the fold, Ohio State is a heavy favorite to win the Big Ten again this season, and rightfully so.

The biggest story with the Buckeyes entering this season is the return of sophomore forward Jared Sullinger, who was the Big Ten's Freshman of the Year last season after he averaged 17.2 points and 10.2 rebounds per game starting all 37 of Ohio State's games. Sullinger enters his sophomore season with similar expectations placed upon him and a Buckeye team being considered a serious Final Four threat. He was recently named the Preseason Big Ten Player of the Year.

But Sullinger's not the only key name back for Ohio State. Also returning is senior guard William Buford, who was the Buckeyes' second-leading scorer last year averaging 14.4 points per game. He also shot a team-high 84.3 percent from

the foul line as a junior, making 59-of-70 free-throw attempts. Buford coming back gives the Buckeyes a key scoring threat when Sullinger gets double- or triple-teamed.

Now there are three key losses from last year's squad. Gone are guards David Lighty and Jon Diebler and center Dallas Lauderdale. Lighty was Ohio State's lockdown defender with 55 steals and 148 rebounds last season, both of which were second on the team. Diebler shot over 50 percent from 3-point range last season and was drafted by the Portland Trail Blazers. Lauderdale's 54 blocked shots were a team-high.

Two of these voids will be filled though by sophomores Aaron Craft and Deshaun Thomas. Craft only started one game, but led the Buckeyes with 177 assists and 77 steals as a freshman. Craft still averaged nearly 30 minutes a game despite coming off the bench and shot 46 percent from the field. Meanwhile, Thomas averaged 7.5 points per game and shot 48 percent as a freshman reserve last year.

As far as incoming freshmen go, Ohio State adds two McDonald's all-Americans to its 2011-12 roster in 6-1 guard Shannon Scott and 6-11 center Amir Williams. Scott comes from Georgia and averaged 14 points and 7.4 assists per game as high school senior en route to being named the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* 2011 Player of the Year. Williams is from the Detroit area and as a high school senior, averaged 18 points, 12.6 rebounds, and five blocks per contest. Williams is a guy that could start right away to complement Sullinger, especially if Thomas remains a threat off the bench for head coach Thad Matta.

The Buckeyes have a loaded non-conference schedule featuring home games against Florida and Duke, as well as a trip to Allen Fieldhouse for an encounter with Kansas on Dec. 10. Of the Big Ten teams with the highest probabilities of challenging Ohio State, three of them – Wisconsin, Michigan, and Michigan State – have to play the Buckeyes twice, and Ohio

State's lone contest against Purdue is at Value City Arena.

With the schedule in place, and the team Matta has assembled, there's no reason why the Buckeyes probably shouldn't three-peat as conference champs, and more importantly, be a serious threat to compete for a national championship in 2011-12.