

2011-12 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Minnesota (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 Minnesota and [Purdue](#). The Golden Gophers will play Iowa twice this season – Jan. 4 at Williams Arena in Minneapolis, Minn., and Feb. 1 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

Minnesota had to be the most disappointing team in Big Ten play last season. It started off strong by winning non-conference games against the likes of North Carolina and West Virginia and was ranked throughout a good portion of the year in the top 25.

The wheels came off during a victory at Michigan, however, when guard Al Nolen sustained a foot injury that kept him out the rest of the way. In addition to that was the unexpected transfer of Devoe Joseph to Oregon, and suddenly, the Golden Gophers weren't the same team.

Minnesota ended up 17-14 overall, finishing ninth in the Big Ten and being bounced by Northwestern in the first round of the Big Ten tournament. There was no postseason basketball for head coach Tubby Smith and his team.

If there's good news up in the Twin Cities when it comes to this year's team, it's Trevor Mbakwe announcing he would return for his senior season. One of the few bright spots for the Golden Gophers last season, the 6-8 forward averaged 13.9

points per game, and led the Big Ten by averaging 10.5 rebounds per contest. Having Mbakwe back gives Minnesota a good chance to bounce back this season.

The Golden Gophers return two other starters from last year's squad in 6-11 senior center Ralph Sampson III and 6-7 junior forward Rodney Williams. Sampson averaged 10.2 points per game and led Minnesota with 61 blocked shots last season. He was also second to Mbakwe in rebounds. Williams' 60 assists is the highest among returning Gopher players.

The biggest issue facing Smith this season is who steps up at guard spots now that Nolen and Blake Hoffarber, who was Minnesota's second leading scorer and assist leader, have moved on. Austin Hollins seems to be one answer, as he started five games for the Golden Gophers last season. The other might be guard Chip Armelin, who didn't start, but did appear in all 31 of their games.

Two other names to watch at the guard spot are both incoming freshmen and both recruits that were the Mr. Basketballs in their respective states. Joe Coleman is a 6-4 guard from Minneapolis that averaged 21.5 points as a senior in high school last year. Andre Hollins, who is originally from Memphis, was a four-year starter in high school and averaged 23.5 points per game his senior year.

Once again, Minnesota has a pretty light non-conference schedule. The marquee games would be back-to-back home contests against Virginia Tech and USC. The Golden Gophers also participate in the Old Spice Classic over Thanksgiving weekend in Orlando, Fla.

In Big Ten play, the single plays are to Minnesota's benefit. Both Ohio State and Purdue have to make trips to Williams Arena, and the lone contest against Michigan is in Ann Arbor. The Golden Gophers have a manageable conference slate to navigate.

Basically, Minnesota's season comes down to two things: How much better can Mbakwe be, and can this team handle adversity differently than it did a year ago? If Mbakwe does build off his strong junior year and the Golden Gophers don't unravel when something like a key injury takes place, then Minnesota has a chance to at the very least be in the discussion for the NCAA Tournament this year. If it's more of the same in Minneapolis, however, then probably not.