

# 2011-12 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Illinois (premium)

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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 Illinois and [Michigan](#). The Fighting Illini only play Iowa once this season, with the meeting taking place on Feb. 26 at Assembly Hall in Champaign, Ill.

Illinois is one of the only teams in the Big Ten I don't have quite a good vibe about yet. The Fighting Illini are coming off a mediocre season by their standards, yet managed to reach the NCAA tournament and even won a second-round game over UNLV before being bounced by Kansas.

Entering this 2011-12 campaign, Illinois loses quite a bit. Gone are the likes of players such as Demetri McCamey, Mike Tisdale and Mike Davis, all of whom were looked towards to provide senior leadership. Jereme Richmond also left the program early, leaving junior guard D.J. Richardson as the lone player on this year's squad with any significant starting experience. Richardson was the Fighting Illini's fifth leading scorer last season, averaging 8.4 points per game.

Also being asked to play a bigger role this season will be junior guard Brandon Paul, who did start 10 games last season, averaged nine points per game, and led Illinois with 36 steals in 2010-11.

As for replacing the size inside, the player that appears most

ready for this role is sophomore Meyers Leonard, who is a 7-1 center. Leonard made one start for the Fighting Illini last season in a win at Minnesota. With Tisdale and Davis no longer around, Leonard is someone Illinois will be counting on for an impact inside.

Illinois just might have a solid replacement at the point in 6-0 senior guard Sam Maniscalco, who will be eligible to play this season after transferring from Bradley, where he averaged 13 points per game during the 2009-10 season. Maniscalco also reached triple-digits in assists in each of the three seasons where he was a factor for Bradley.

If Maniscalco is able to fit in right away to what Illinois head coach Bruce Weber has in place, then the Fighting Illini might end up being better than some like myself see them being.

Looking at Illinois' incoming freshmen class, it consists of seven players, with four of the seven coming in as top 100 recruits that are all from Chicago. 6-11 Nnanna Ekwu is the one who might have an immediate impact alongside Leonard in the interior, as he averaged 16 points, 10 rebounds and five blocks as a high school senior last year. 6-8 forward Mike Shaw, 6-1 guard Tracy Abrams, and 6-6 Myke Henry are the other three Chicago products to watch for this year. How these freshmen respond to early playing time could determine how far the Fighting Illini go in 2011-12.

Illinois' schedule features an appearance in the Cancun Challenge where it faces a Richmond squad that reached the Sweet 16 last season. It also features for marquee non-conference games at Maryland, at home against Gonzaga, a game against UNLV in Chicago, and the Fighting Illini's annual showdown against Missouri played in St. Louis.

In Big Ten play, Illinois only has to play Michigan State once, and that game is at Assembly Hall on Jan. 31. The end of

the season is worth noting, as three of the Fighting Illini's final four Big Ten games come against each of the three teams ranked in the preseason AP top 25 – at Ohio State, Michigan, and at Wisconsin.

Illinois is probably a middle-of-the-pack Big Ten team this season that maybe could finish third or fourth if some breaks go its way. A lot of it will depend on how everything fits together between the new pieces coming in and the old ones that have never really been placed in a leadership position before.