

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

By Brendan Stiles

*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 [Illinois](#) and Michigan. The Wolverines come into this season ranked 18th nationally and will only play Iowa once this season, with the meeting taking place on Jan. 14 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

I get that some of the pundits aren't as high on Michigan anymore because of the fact that Darius Morris opted to declare early for the NBA Draft last summer (Morris was picked by the Los Angeles Lakers). I get that he was a very valuable player in the Wolverines' road to becoming a legitimate Big Ten team once again.

But with that being said, I still believe Michigan might be the second-best team in the Big Ten and probably the biggest threat to Ohio State's quest for a three-peat.

Morris is gone, but he's the only starter gone from a squad that barely lost to Duke in the third round of the NCAA tournament last March. Returning are a pair of seniors that have both gotten better in guards Stu Douglass and Zack Novak. In fact, Novak was the Wolverines' leading rebounder in 2010-11, averaging 5.8 rebounds per game.

The player to watch though is sophomore guard Tim Hardaway, Jr., who burst on the scene in a big way last year and might

have been the Big Ten's Freshman of the Year had it not been for Ohio State's Jared Sullinger. Hardaway started all 35 of Michigan's games last season and got better as the season progressed. He finished his freshman campaign shooting 42 percent from the floor, including 36.7 percent from beyond the arc. Hardaway was also second to Morris in both assists (59) and steals (34).

Michigan head coach John Beilein commented at Big Ten Media Day about how Hardaway has become a more unselfish player during the offseason. If he's able to take on Morris' role and get his teammates involved more while remaining the scoring threat he became last year, then the Wolverines are going to be in excellent shape.

Also coming back is forward Jordan Morgan, who shot 63 percent from the floor last season, was second to Novak in rebounds, and led Michigan with 19 blocked shots a year ago. How he continues to develop as a post threat will also have an impact on how the Wolverines do in 2011-12.

Beilein's incoming freshman class features one marquee name in 6-1 guard Trey Burke, who strangely enough is from Columbus, Ohio. If Burke can take Morris' place at point guard and show flashes of brilliance right away, then it might be just a matter of time before his play impacts the play of everyone else around him. If he's as good as has been advertised by some, Michigan shouldn't honestly miss a beat.

The Wolverines will be testing themselves this season, make no mistake. In addition to non-conference games against Virginia, Iowa State and Arkansas, Michigan is part of a loaded 2011 Maui Invitational field including the very team that eliminated it from the tournament last season, Duke. The Wolverines' first game in this tournament is Nov. 21 against Memphis.

Drawing teams such as Wisconsin and Purdue only once during

Big Ten play could end up playing to Michigan's benefit once the conference slate comes around. Having five of their first seven Big Ten games at Crisler Arena also could be critical. However, three straight road games against Arkansas, Purdue and Ohio State in late January could be most telling, especially with a home game against Michigan State taking place before that stretch. The Wolverines end conference play with three of four away from Ann Arbor.

The pieces are in place for Beilein to have another big year, and if there's a team in this conference that has any chance of dethroning Ohio State, the first place to look might be here with Michigan.