

2011-12 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Indiana (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 Indiana and [Wisconsin](#). The Hoosiers will play Iowa twice this season – Jan. 29 at Assembly Hall in Bloomington, Ind., and Feb. 19 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

Whether this year is when Indiana finally takes off under head coach Tom Crean remains a strong question. But the Hoosiers are getting closer to becoming a contender again.

Indiana took a big hit before the season started when it was discovered that Maurice Creek would miss the entire 2011-12 season with a torn Achilles' tendon injury after missing most of the last two seasons with injuries to both of his knees. Before any of these injuries took affect, Creek had proven as a freshman two seasons ago he could hold his own in the Big Ten, so not having him return to the lineup is a serious blow to this Hoosier club.

The good news for Indiana is that four of its five starters from a season ago are back, as is the majority of the depth from last year's squad that finished last in the Big Ten. This includes each of the Hoosiers' top three leading scorers from last season – junior Christian Watford, senior Verdell Jones III, and junior Jordan Hulls.

Watford not only averaged a team-high 16 points per game, but

he also led the Hoosiers in rebounding averaging 5.4 boards per contest last year. Meanwhile, Hulls returns this year after leading Indiana in assists (94) and 3-point field goal percentage, shooting 41.4 percent from beyond the arc. Having this type of production can't hurt with both players being a year older and more experienced.

Other names returning this season include sophomore Victor Oladipo, who shot a team-high 55 percent from the floor, and was third in rebounding. There's also senior Tom Pritchard, junior Derek Elston, and sophomore Will Sheehey. Pritchard led the Hoosiers with 23 blocked shots and was second in rebounding to Watford averaging 3.8 boards per game. Elston was Indiana's fourth-leading rebounder and shot over 50 percent from the floor. Again, the depth is there for Crean this season.

The biggest story, perhaps literally, came in recruiting, as Indiana landed a local product in freshman center Cody Zeller, the younger brother of North Carolina's Tyler Zeller. Cody Zeller was a McDonald's all-American last year and averaged 24.6 points and 13 rebounds per game as a high school senior. He averaged 20.5 points and 11.4 rebounds per game the year before as a junior. Zeller is also the first marquee recruit Crean has been able to lure into Bloomington since taking over in 2008, and could very well be a program-changer if he pans out the way many expect him to.

As far as the Hoosiers' schedule is concerned, games at Assembly Hall against Butler and Kentucky stand out, as both the Bulldogs and Wildcats reached the Final Four last season. Indiana also plays Notre Dame in Indianapolis on Dec. 17 as part of the Crossroads Classic. Big Ten play isn't kind to the Hoosiers, at least in the early going, as Indiana opens at Michigan State, then has a pair of home games against Ohio State and Michigan. One of the single plays is a trip to Wisconsin, but the Hoosiers also draw Illinois at home as a single play. The schedule concludes with home games against

Michigan State and Purdue, which come after a manageable February.

Is Indiana an NCAA tournament team yet? Probably not. But again, the Hoosiers are getting close. There's no reason this team should finish in last place like it did last season, and something like the NIT might not be out of the question for a team whose expectations are becoming greater and greater. They could surprise if someone fills the void left by Creek and if Zeller ends up being better than advertised.