

# 2011-12 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Northwestern (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 [Michigan State](#), Northwestern and [Penn State](#). The Wildcats will play Iowa twice this season – Feb. 9 at Welsh-Ryan Arena in Evanston, Ill., and March 3 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

Northwestern came “oh so close” to making history in 2010-11. The Wildcats reached the 20-win plateau, but an eighth place finish in the Big Ten and not having enough quality wins resulted in Northwestern missing out on its first ever NCAA tournament last season. However, it was the Big Ten's lone participant in the NIT, and a loss to Washington State is all that kept the Wildcats from playing at Madison Square Garden in late March.

Looking at Northwestern as it enters 2011-12, most of the same pieces from last year's squad remain in place. The Wildcats return four starters, including senior forward John Shurna, who initially put his name in for the NBA Draft before deciding to return to school. The one starter lost was a big one though in Michael “Juice” Thompson, who led the Wildcats in assists, steals and was far and away their best free-throw shooter a year ago.

Shurna returns after leading Northwestern in scoring, averaging 16.6 points per game while 48 percent from the floor. He was also the team's leader with 31 blocked shots and

was second in both assists and steals to Thompson. The other key player returning is junior Drew Crawford, who was third on the team in scoring with 12.1 points per game. Make no mistake, head coach Bill Carmody will be counting on both Shurna and Crawford to carry the load this season.

Also coming back is senior center Luka Mirkovic, who shot a team-high 51 percent and led the Wildcats in rebounding after averaging 5.2 boards per game. He was also second to Shurna in blocked shots, and was third on the team in assists. Sophomore guard JerShon Cobb comes off a freshman campaign where he started 25 games for Northwestern and averaged 7.4 points per game.

One player who played a role coming off the bench last season and might have more expectations placed upon him is junior guard Alex Marcotullio. Despite only starting seven games as a sophomore, Marcotullio averaged over 23 minutes per game of playing time, was second to Shurna in steals with 34 takeaways, and posted 73 assists while also shooting 41 percent from the floor. Senior forward Davide Curletti will also likely help Mirkovic this season in providing the Wildcats with some sort of post presence.

Mike Turner is a 6-8 forward from Chicago that headlines Northwestern's freshmen class after he averaged 19 points, nine rebounds, and two blocked shots per game as a high school senior.

The non-conference slate is highlighted by a home game against Baylor, as well as a trip to Creighton and an appearance in the 2011 Charleston Classic. Northwestern will be tested early in Big Ten play with the first three conference road games coming against Ohio State, Michigan and Wisconsin. With the single plays, the lone meeting with Michigan State is at Welsh-Ryan Arena. However, the one game the Wildcats have against Wisconsin will be in Madison. The last two home games of the season are against Michigan and Ohio State.

Northwestern is probably a middle-of-the-pack Big Ten team again this season. I have my doubts as to the Wildcats finally reaching their first NCAA tournament this season, partially because I don't think the non-conference schedule does them any favors. But the nucleus is such that a decent season is possible in Evanston this year, and it wouldn't surprise me if Northwestern at least reached the 20-win mark once again.