

# 2012 Big Ten football previews: Penn State (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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The first team I'll discuss in our series of Big Ten season previews is the Penn State Nittany Lions. Iowa will play Penn State on Oct. 20 at Kinnick Stadium.

*(Before going in-depth in discussing the Nittany Lions here, I want to make abundantly clear that I already established the opinion [on this site last month that I don't think Penn State should play football in 2012](#) and did so three days before the NCAA imposed sanctions on the football program, which included a postseason ban and significant scholarship reductions. Because of this and because Penn State will be allowed to play football this fall, the intent of this post is simply to focus on the actual football team, or in this case, what's left of it, just like all the other Big Ten football teams I intend to write about over the coming days.)*

As hard as it is to even think about football at Penn State given everything that has surfaced over the last nine months, I'm going to make my best attempt here to strictly talk about the current squad led by first-year head coach Bill O'Brien. And to be quite honest, I'm not sure where to start.

With the sanctions brought down on the football program July 23, as well as the ability for Penn State players to transfer to another FBS program without losing any eligibility this fall, the make-up of this team isn't remotely close to what it appeared to be even a month ago. Just in the last three weeks, the Nittany Lions have seen nine players leave for other

programs. Among those players were back-up quarterback Rob Bolden (who started last season as Penn State's starter before being demoted and eventually transferring to LSU), kicker Anthony Fera (Texas), returning leading wideout Justin Brown (Oklahoma) and junior running back Silas Redd transferring to USC.

Redd's departure was the most significant of all, as he was widely regarded as the Nittany Lions' best player. As a sophomore last season, Redd rushed for 1,241 yards and seven touchdowns and was a huge reason why Penn State won eight of its first nine games – all of which have since been vacated as part of the punishment handed down by the NCAA.

With the hole at running back, one player in the backfield Penn State might have to rely on more now is junior Curtis Dukes, who was third on the team in rushing last season with 237 yards and one touchdown. Senior fullback Michael Zordich also provides experience to the backfield, as well as leadership the Nittany Lion offense is going to need.

Unlike the last few years, there's no controversy at quarterback with senior Matt McGloin firmly at the helm. McGloin emerged midway through the season as the starting signal-caller and finished his junior season by compiling 1,751 yards through the air with eight touchdowns and five interceptions. The question becomes how much that can improve given the lack of playmakers Penn State now features in the receiving corps.

The offensive line features one returning starter from last season – center Matt Stankiewitch. He, along with junior guard John Urschel look to be the two anchors up front for the Nittany Lions in 2012.

While the offense faces loads of uncertainty, Penn State does have leaders in its defensive front seven. While losing the likes of defensive tackle Devon Still to the NFL following a

season where he was named Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year, senior defensive tackle Jordan Hill returns after a year where he recorded 59 tackles. The defensive line will also have the services of defensive end Pete Massaro, who looked to play a prominent role last season before tearing his ACL in the spring.

As for the linebacking corps, the names to watch are Gerald Hodges and Michael Mauti. Hodges led Penn State with 106 tackles last season and was first-team all-Big Ten. Mauti looked to be heading down a similar path before suffering a season-ending knee injury against Temple and in recent weeks, he has also become somewhat of a spokesperson for the players.

Before the sanctions were announced, Penn State looked like a team that could win around 7-8 games this season. Now, I'm not so sure. The Nittany Lions have the leadership on the defensive side of the ball to be formidable, but unless they're also providing a lion's share of the points this season, Penn State might struggle scoring 200 points this season (approximately 17 points per game). Given what's no longer at O'Brien's disposal offensively, I don't see this as an exaggeration.

Penn State doesn't get any favors in scheduling, either. Sure, three of the four non-conference games are at Beaver Stadium, but the season-opener is against an Ohio squad that nearly won the MAC last year and might be the favorite to win it this year. The non-conference slate also features a trip to Virginia, who played in the Chick-Fil-A Bowl last year.

As far as Big Ten play is concerned, it won't matter in the grand scheme of things since Penn State won't be playing for a Big Ten title until 2016 at the earliest. But trips to Illinois, Iowa, Purdue and Nebraska all might be too much for the Nittany Lions to overcome now. Penn State gets both Ohio State and Wisconsin at home, which might have played to its benefit at this time a year ago but doesn't now.

I'm not going to question O'Brien's coaching or leadership skills. Given how productive the New England Patriots were with him as their offensive coordinator and the poise he has already demonstrated since taking this job, I think Penn State made a smart hire. But the fact of the matter is Penn State's talent deficiency has already become a growing concern that will only get bigger in the years ahead with it only being allowed 65 scholarship players as opposed to the regular 85.

**AUDIO:** [Penn State LB Michael Mauti](#)