

2012 Big Ten football previews: Ohio State (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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After looking at [Penn State](#) on Monday, we turn our attention to previewing the upcoming season for the Ohio State Buckeyes. Iowa does not play Ohio State in 2012.

Before going too in-depth discussing Ohio State, I'll point out the obvious that the Buckeyes do have a postseason ban in effect this season that bars them from playing for the Big Ten championship next December and from playing in any bowl game. This is the only year this postseason ban is in place.

Now, with that being said, let me say something that apparently no one is willing to say because of Ohio State's postseason ban – the Buckeyes might wind up being the best team in the Big Ten this season, even without a championship trophy to its name.

That might seem crazy given that this will be Urban Meyer's first season at the coaching helm. But I got to say, I think the year away from coaching gave Meyer a different perspective that will benefit him going forward and like Brady Hoke at Michigan last season, Meyer is the kind of coach that could have an immediate impact in the Big Ten.

When assembling his coaching staff, Meyer made the decision to keep Luke Fickell on board as a defensive assistant, despite Ohio State going 6-7 last season under Fickell's watch as the interim head coach. I think it was wise for Meyer to do this, because while Fickell might not be cut out to be a head coach,

he has proven over the course of time to be a solid assistant for the Buckeyes.

Ohio State brings back 15 of 22 starters from last year's team. The most significant returnee on the offensive side of the ball is sophomore quarterback Braxton Miller, who eventually emerged as the Buckeye starter midway through last season. Miller had his struggles early on, but eventually finished with 1,159 passing yards, 715 rushing yards and he accounted for 20 touchdowns. Given his play-making ability, as well as being able to spend an entire offseason learning an offense he should thrive in, I expect Miller to post better numbers in his sophomore campaign.

In the ground game, Ohio State will be without the services of senior running back Jordan Hall for at least a few weeks due to a foot injury suffered in the summer. Once he returns to the backfield however, I see him being a key part of the Buckeyes' offense.

The same can be said for senior tight end Jake Stoneburner, whose 14 receptions last season included seven touchdown catches. Those seven scores were good for fourth among all tight ends in 2011. If he posts similar or better numbers in 2012, there's a good chance Stoneburner winds up being first-team all-Big Ten.

Two areas where Ohio State will need players to emerge this season are at receiver and along the offensive line. The wideouts who are returning are either inexperienced or have yet to simply post typical receiver's numbers. As for the O-line, it loses center Mike Brewster and both tackles off last year's squad.

Defensively, the Buckeyes have as good a duo of defensive linemen as there is in the entire conference with senior defensive end John Simon and junior defensive tackle Johnathan Hankins. Simon recorded 53 tackles and led Ohio State with

seven sacks last season, while Hankins is coming off a sophomore campaign where he compiled 69 tackles and three sacks.

The secondary also features loads of experience, as the four projected starters combined for 49 starts, 25 pass break-ups and seven interceptions in 2011. Junior safeties C.J. Barnett and Christian Bryant are Ohio State's top returning leading tacklers from last season.

While the front four and back four seem set, the linebacking corps has the biggest question mark surrounding it, losing Andrew Sweat and Storm Klein from last year's squad – Klein was dismissed from the team by Meyer during the offseason. Both senior Etienne Sabino and sophomore Ryan Shazier made starts for the Buckeyes last season, but neither was a regular fixture like Sweat or Klein. Sabino recorded 62 tackles, while Shazier had 57 tackles.

As far as special teams is concerned, Hall would be Ohio State's main return man once he returns from injury. The good news for the Buckeyes is both junior kicker Dan Basil and senior punter Bret Buchanan return in 2012. Basil led the conference in field goal percentage connecting on 16-of-19 field goal attempts in 2011, while Buchanan averaged 37.4 yards per punt and only had three touchbacks on 70 punts.

Looking at Ohio State's schedule, circle the date of Sept. 29. The Buckeyes travel to East Lansing, Mich., to play Michigan State that day and should enter that contest 4-0 with all four of their non-conference games in the Horseshoe against teams they should beat. If Ohio State were to leave Spartan Stadium with a victory, the possibility of the Buckeyes being 10-0 entering its Nov. 17 showdown at Wisconsin is very real.

Sandwiched between those road games at Michigan State and Wisconsin are five games – vs. Nebraska, at Indiana, vs. Purdue, at Penn State, vs. Illinois – plus a bye week prior to

that trip to Madison. Given everything that has transpired with Penn State over recent weeks, it's safe to say the three toughest games Ohio State has during that stretch are all in Columbus. Yes, the Buckeyes lost to both Nebraska and Purdue last season, but both games were on the road and both were games Ohio State let slip away. I don't expect the same thing to happen this fall with those teams visiting the Horseshoe.

Let's also keep in mind that with the postseason ban, Ohio State's regular season finale against Michigan will essentially be the Buckeyes' bowl game in 2012, especially with the Wolverines finally ending a seven-game losing streak to the Buckeyes last year. It might also be an opportunity for Ohio State to spoil Michigan's hopes of winning the Big Ten in 2012, so the magnitude of this game won't be any different compared to before.

There are questions, just like there is with every team at this time of year, but there's enough in place for Meyer to leave a lasting impression on the entire Big Ten in Year One of his regime in Columbus. If Ohio State winds up having a big season, expect it to be among the early favorites to win the conference in 2013 once the postseason ban expires.

AUDIO: [Ohio State DE John Simon](#)