

2012 Big Ten football previews: Illinois (premium)

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So far, we have previewed [Penn State](#), [Ohio State](#) and [Indiana](#). The next Big Ten team we will examine is the Illinois Fighting Illini. Iowa does not play Illinois in 2012.

There are some things to feel good about if you're an Illinois fan. The Fighting Illini are coming off their second straight bowl win and this year's roster does feature some talent on both sides of the football.

I just don't know how much better Illinois will be in 2012 though. Yes, Ron Zook was fired – a move that had to be made after the Fighting Illini started last season 6-0 only to lose their final six regular season games. Yes, Tim Beckham comes to Illinois after serving as the head coach at Toledo, where he had a pretty decent coaching tenure.

But by the same token, this is the same team that saw four players get picked in the first two rounds of the NFL Draft last spring and let's face it, there's some rebuilding aspects in play.

It appears junior Nathan Scheelhaase will get the chance to redeem himself as Illinois' starting quarterback this fall. He started all 13 of the Fighting Illini's games last season, but saw his playing time at quarterback get diminished during their six-game losing streak in favor of sophomore Reilly O'Toole.

Scheelhaase accounted for 19 of Illinois' touchdowns (13 passing, six rushing), throwing for 2,110 yards and rushing

for another 624 yards, which led the team. He also threw eight interceptions. O'Toole appeared in a total of 10 games and threw for 270 yards with one touchdown and four interceptions. Expect Scheelhaase to be used more frequently again, but if he does start struggling as the season progresses, at least Beckman knows he has an experienced back-up.

At running back, Illinois might see itself relying on a redshirt freshman early on in Josh Ferguson, who appeared in three games last season before suffering a season-ending hamstring injury. Sophomore running back Donovan Young did rush for 451 yards and six touchdowns on 87 carries as a freshman, but battled with injuries during the spring. Young started one game last season and had one 100-yard rushing performance that came against Western Michigan, who Illinois coincidentally opens 2012 with.

The Fighting Illini lost their most valuable offensive weapon from last year in wide receiver A.J. Jenkins, who decided to forego his senior year for the NFL Draft and was a first-round pick of the San Francisco 49ers. Jenkins led the Big Ten with 90 catches and he also compiled 1,276 yards receiving and eight touchdowns. To put this into perspective, junior Spencer Harris – who was Illinois' second-leading receiver last season – had 26 catches for 226 receiving yards and only one touchdown. If the Fighting Illini are going to be successful on offense, they'll need playmakers to step up in both the backfield and receiving corps.

Up front, Illinois has a pair of seniors that are moving around. Graham Pocic, who has started every game the past two seasons at center, has been working at guard during fall camp. Hugh Thornton, who started 10 games at guard last year, has moved over to left tackle. Junior Jake Feldmeyer is likely to take over at center with Pocic moving, and sophomores Michael Heitz and Simon Cvijanovic look to figure into the O-line equation as well.

Now the defensive side of the ball – specifically the front seven – is what should excite Fighting Illini fans in 2012. Although this team no longer has defensive end Whitney Mercilus, who led the Big Ten with 16 sacks last season and was a first-round pick of the Houston Texans, the D-line features a big-time duo with junior defensive tackle Akeem Spence and senior defensive end Michael Buchanan. Spence started all 13 of Illinois' games last year and recorded 69 tackles, while Buchanan had 64 tackles (13.5 tackles for loss) and was second to Mercilus with 7.5 sacks, good for fourth in the Big Ten.

The linebacking corps lost a pair of starters off last year's squad, but the one returnee might be the most important player in this entire Fighting Illini defense. Junior middle linebacker Jonathan Brown led Illinois with 108 tackles and also compiled six sacks and two fumble recoveries. With Spence, Buchanan and Brown all in the front seven, this defense will be one of the stingiest in the entire conference.

Illinois will feature three seniors in its secondary, with the most notable being cornerback Terry Hawthorne. Last season, Hawthorne recorded 60 tackles and led the Fighting Illini with three interceptions and eight pass break-ups. Free safety Supo Sanni started 11 games in 2011 and finished the year with 49 tackles.

On special teams, Illinois brings back sophomore punter Justin DuVernois after he had 53 punts and averaged 38.3 yards per punt last season. However, it will need to find a replacement at placekicker in Derek Dimke, who made 10-of-12 field goals his senior season and also handled the team's kickoff duties.

Last year, Illinois had a very favorable schedule. This year, it's almost the exact opposite. There's only one road game during non-conference play, but it's at Arizona State, has a late kickoff start time, and the Sun Devils will be looking for revenge after losing to the Fighting Illini last season in

Champaign.

Highlighting Illinois' Big Ten slate are road games during consecutive weeks in early October against Wisconsin and Michigan, two of the teams being favored by many to win the conference in 2012. Also included is a road contest at Ohio State on Nov. 3, the very team that started the Fighting Illini's 2011 tailspin.

While the road games are brutal however, the seven contests Illinois has at Memorial Stadium are all winnable games. The toughest one might be the home finale against Purdue on Nov. 17.

I won't be surprised if Illinois does win 7-8 games this season simply because it has the defense in place to do so. But I also wouldn't be shocked if this team takes a step back, primarily because of the uncertainty that exists across the offensive side of the ball.

AUDIO: [Illinois QB Nathan Scheelhaase](#)