

2012 Big Ten football previews: Purdue (premium)

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After discussing [Penn State](#), [Ohio State](#), [Indiana](#) and [Illinois](#), the next Big Ten team I will spend time focusing on is the Purdue Boilermakers. Iowa will play Purdue on Nov. 10 at Kinnick Stadium.

If there's one team that perfectly fits the "dark horse" label in the Big Ten this upcoming season, it's the Purdue Boilermakers. Coming off a seven-win campaign capped off by beating Western Michigan 37-32 in the 2011 Little Caesars Bowl, it seems clear to me that fourth-year head coach Danny Hope has this team heading in the right direction.

Add in the fact that neither Ohio State nor Penn State can participate in any postseason play this season and this might be as good an opportunity as Purdue will have at winning the Leaders Division and playing down the road in Indianapolis at the Big Ten Championship Game on Dec. 1.

This team has a boatload of starters returning on both sides of the football and perhaps the most intrigue, once again, comes at the quarterback position. Hope made clear at Big Ten Media Day last month that senior Caleb TerBush would be the starting signal-caller. At this time last season, TerBush was third behind both Rob Henry and Robert Marve, only to find himself starting all 13 of Purdue's games in 2011 after Henry tore his ACL and Marve missed the first two games of the season.

When Marve was healthy, both he and TerBush were frequently used in the Boilermaker offense. TerBush completed 61 percent

of his passes for 1,905 yards and threw 13 touchdowns to six interceptions, while Marve threw for 633 yards in 10 games and had four touchdowns to five picks. Marve was granted a sixth year of eligibility by the NCAA this offseason, turning what looked to be a two-quarterback carousel this year with Henry returning to now a three-quarterback carousel. TerBush will start, but don't be shocked if either Marve or Henry gets used from time to time.

At running back, Purdue hopes to have senior Ralph Bolden healthy by its season opener on Sept. 1. Bolden, who was the Boilermakers' leading rusher last season with 674 yards and six touchdowns on 148 carries, tore his ACL in early December, three weeks before Purdue played in the Little Caesars Bowl. If Bolden can't go, the Boilermakers also bring back senior Akeem Shavers and sophomore Akeem Hunt, who were the team's second and third leading rushers one year ago.

The receiving corps lost Justin Siller, who led the Boilermakers with 50 catches last season. However, senior Antavian Edison, junior O.J. Ross and sophomore Gary Bush all return to lead this group in 2012. Edison posted a team-high 584 yards receiving on 44 catches, while Ross had 33 receptions for 356 yards and Bush 29 catches for 210 yards. All three tied for a team-high three touchdown catches in 2011. Purdue also has a pair of tight ends in senior Crosby Wright and junior Gabe Holmes. Wright had 16 catches for 223 yards and a pair of touchdowns, while Holmes caught 11 passes for 133 yards and had one score.

The Boilermakers have experience returning on the offensive line, but it's the one group that has the biggest question mark surrounding it on offense. The two most experienced are a pair of seniors – center Rick Schmeig and guard Peters Drey. Junior Justin Kitchens will likely play at one of the tackle spots. The name to keep an eye on though is sophomore Devin Smith, who could wind up emerging as the left tackle.

Headlining the defense up front is senior defensive tackle Kawann Short, who was first-team all-Big Ten last season and is arguably the best defensive tackle in the entire conference entering this season. As a junior, Short compiled 54 tackles, 17 of which were for a loss of yardage, as well as 6.5 sacks. Listed at 6-3, 310 pounds, this guy clogs up the middle and could very easily post better numbers in 2012. Two other defensive linemen worth noting are junior defensive tackle Bruce Gaston and sophomore defensive end Ryan Russell. Gaston had 30 tackles and four sacks, while Russell recorded 33 tackles.

The linebacking corps lost leading tackler Joe Holland, but returns its second and third-leading tacklers from last season – senior Dwayne Beckford and junior Will Lucas. Beckford recorded 91 tackles and looks to command the middle linebacker spot this fall, while Lucas had 82 tackles and will be on the outside.

In the secondary, Purdue features a solid duo of corners in junior Ricardo Allen and senior Josh Johnson. While Johnson led the team with nine pass break ups, Allen is the one considered to be one of the Big Ten's best. After a breakout freshman campaign in 2010, Allen recorded 81 tackles and led the Boilermakers with three interceptions.

Special teams might be where Purdue has its biggest question mark though with Carson Wiggs no longer around. Not only did Wiggs handle both the punting and kicking duties for the Boilermakers, but he was also regarded as one of the overall team leaders. Last year, Wiggs was 19-of-25 on field goal attempts with four of those misses coming from beyond 40 yards. He also had 71 kickoffs and had 17 of his 23 punts land inside the opponents' 20-yard line. Eventually, the punting duties were handed over to Cody Webster, who will be a sophomore. Webster averaged 42.9 yards per punt on 45 attempts and landed 11 of them inside the 20.

The game to note is Purdue's second game of the season – Sept. 8 at Notre Dame – as it might be a strong indicator of whether or not the Boilermakers take that next step in 2012. Should Purdue record its first win over the Fighting Irish in South Bend since 2004, it should enter Big Ten play with a 4-0 record.

While the month of October is brutal on paper, it's also what makes this season look so opportunistic for the Boilermakers. Their first two Big Ten games are both at Ross-Ade Stadium against Michigan and Wisconsin in consecutive weeks. Win either or both of those games – especially the Oct. 13 contest against the Badgers – and Purdue's chances of winning the Leaders Division would skyrocket dramatically. It would also well-equip the Boilermakers for the ensuing five-game stretch that features four games away from West Lafayette.

I'm not saying Purdue will dethrone Wisconsin in the Leaders, but this is one team no one in the Big Ten should sleep on. This is easily Hope's most talented squad since he became head coach and it's a team that, at the very least, should find itself playing in a decent bowl game this winter if it can reach 7-8 wins.

AUDIO: [Purdue DT Kawann Short](#)