

2012 Big Ten football previews: Wisconsin (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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After examining [Penn State](#), [Ohio State](#), [Indiana](#), [Illinois](#) and [Purdue](#), we now take time to discuss the upcoming 2012 season for last year's Big Ten champion, the 12th-ranked Wisconsin Badgers. Iowa will not play Wisconsin in 2012.

Look, I get the hype and understand why there's so much of it surrounding this Wisconsin football program right now. Two straight Big Ten crowns, two straight trips to Pasadena. Sure, the Badgers didn't win in either of those Rose Bowl appearances they've had the past two seasons, but they've proven to be the class of the Big Ten.

But this year, I'm not seeing it. I understand that with No. 18 Ohio State and Penn State having postseason bans that the Leaders Division is all but locked up for Wisconsin in 2012. However, I don't believe this Badger team will be elite – at least not as elite as the 2010 and 2011 squads were.

Wisconsin head coach Bret Bielema found himself hiring six new assistant coaches after a chunk of his staff from last season followed former offensive coordinator Paul Chryst to Pittsburgh, where Chryst is now the head coach. Of the six new assistants, four of them are on the offensive side of the ball including offensive coordinator/quarterbacks coach Matt Canada, who came over to Wisconsin after serving as an assistant at Northern Illinois last year.

The one spot Wisconsin doesn't have a new offensive assistant is with the running backs, which seems appropriate given the season Montee Ball had for the Badgers in 2011. A Heisman

Trophy finalist, Ball tied Barry Sanders' all-time NCAA record of 39 all-purpose touchdowns last season – 33 of those 39 scores came on the ground – and surprised many by announcing he'd return for his senior year. Ball might not rush for as many touchdowns in 2012, but expect him to be the focal point of the Wisconsin offense once again.

Joining him in the backfield will be junior James White, who followed up his phenomenal freshman season in 2010 with 713 yards rushing and six touchdowns last year. This is undoubtedly the strength of the Wisconsin offense.

As for the biggest question mark, it comes at quarterback, where the Badgers are looking to fill the void left by Russell Wilson. After transferring from North Carolina State, Wilson lived up to the hype that came with him to Madison. He threw for 3,175 yards and 33 touchdowns to only four interceptions. He also rushed for 338 yards and six touchdowns and found himself picked in the third round of the 2012 NFL Draft by the Seattle Seahawks.

Right now, the Badgers have a 3-way battle going to see who will be quarterback between senior Curt Phillips, redshirt freshman Joel Stave and junior Danny O'Brien, who transferred from Maryland last year and was granted eligibility to play in 2012. Ultimately, I think O'Brien wins this job much like Wilson did at this time a year ago. Phillips winning the job would be quite a story since he has missed each of the last two seasons due to injury. Whoever does win this job though, I can safely say, won't bring the same dynamic Wilson brought to this team.

The receiving corps no longer features Nick Toon, who had team-highs of 64 receptions and 10 touchdowns as a senior. Two returning players whose roles will elevate in the passing game are junior wideout Jared Abbrederis and junior tight end Jacob Pedersen, both of whom had eight touchdown catches last year. Abbrederis caught 55 passes for a team-high 933 yards

receiving, both of which lead all returning conference wideouts. Pedersen compiled 30 receptions for 356 yards. Wisconsin will need to find a second receiver to complement both of these guys.

Up front, the Badgers continue to live up to their billing with offensive linemen that all weigh over 300 pounds. The best of the bunch this year is senior Ricky Wagner, who will be playing at left tackle in 2012. Wagner made the watch list this summer for the Outland Trophy and looks to follow in the footsteps of Bielema-era left tackles like Joe Thomas and Gabe Carimi. However, Wisconsin lost three starting linemen off last year's squad including center Peter Konz and guard Kevin Zietler, both of whom were picked in the first two rounds of the NFL Draft. Junior Travis Frederick started 13 games last season and will make the move to center to replace Konz, leaving questions at both the guard spots and right tackle.

The defensive line returns a pair of experienced players in senior Brendan Kelly and junior Ethan Hemer. Two names to watch for as far as who joins them along the front four are junior defensive tackle Beau Allen and junior D-end David Gilbert. Allen appeared in all 14 games last year and was second on the team with four sacks. Gilbert had three sacks playing in just four games.

If there's a strength on this defense, it comes in the linebacking corps. The Big Ten's top two leading tacklers in 2011 both return for the Badgers – senior outside linebacker Mike Taylor and junior middle linebacker Chris Borland. Taylor led the conference with 150 tackles, while Borland was second with 143 tackles, 19 of which were for a loss of yardage. Together, this duo combined for 4.5 sacks, four interceptions, eight forced fumbles, eight pass break ups and Taylor had a pair of fumble recoveries.

Wisconsin returns senior safety Shelton Johnson and senior cornerback Marcus Cromartie, but needs to find replacements

for safety Aaron Henry and cornerback Antonio Fenelus. Johnson had 54 tackles, four pass break ups and four interceptions while Cromartie comes off a season where he had 47 tackles and three pass break ups. A name that will likely emerge in Henry's place is junior Dezmen Southward, who had 35 tackles in 2011.

On special teams, the Badgers will have both a new punter and new kicker in 2012. While it remains to be seen who will handle punting duties for Wisconsin, sophomore Kyle French is expected to handle kicking duties this fall. French was 3-of-5 on field goal tries as a freshman and had four kickoffs that averaged 56.8 yards per kick. The return game is set however with Abbrederis, who led the Big Ten last year with an average of 15.8 yards per punt return.

Wisconsin should be 4-0 entering its Big Ten opener at No. 17 Nebraska on Sept. 29. Playing at Oregon State could be challenging, and the Badgers do play a Utah State squad that went bowling last year, but neither have enough to pull off upsets. While many will talk about that Nebraska game, the one that will pretty much decide whether the Badgers should just already be crowned Leaders Division champions comes Oct. 13 at Purdue. Wisconsin has won each of the last six meetings it has had with the Boilermakers, but Purdue seems to be the one challenge among eligible teams in the division and the game's not at Camp Randall Stadium.

The Badgers wouldn't play No. 8 Michigan unless they meet in the Big Ten title game and they have the luxury of its Big Ten Championship rematch with No. 13 Michigan State being at home after playing the Spartans each of the past two seasons in East Lansing, Mich.

However, if Wisconsin does find itself on its way to Indianapolis by the time it plays its last two games against Ohio State and Penn State, both games could be prove more difficult than anticipated. The Buckeyes could realistically

enter Camp Randall Stadium with a 10-0 record despite being ineligible for postseason play. As for that game at Penn State, it's the Nittany Lions' last regular season game. While Penn State doesn't have the firepower offensively to hang with Wisconsin, that game is essentially the Nittany Lions' bowl game and I would expect them to come out swinging from the start, no matter the circumstance.

Can the Badgers win the Big Ten again and make it a Pasadena three-peat? Sure. Will they? I have my doubts, but who knows? Maybe Wisconsin doesn't take that step back I foresee it taking in 2012.

AUDIO: [Wisconsin RB Montee Ball](#)