

2012 Big Ten football previews: Northwestern (premium)

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After previewing the Big Ten's Leaders Division consisting of [Penn State](#), [Ohio State](#), [Indiana](#), [Illinois](#), [Purdue](#) and [Wisconsin](#), our first look at the Legends Division features the Northwestern Wildcats. Iowa visits Ryan Field in Evanston, Ill., on Oct. 27.

Last season looked like it could be one of promise for Northwestern. A very experienced Wildcat team began the season 2-0 despite not having the services of quarterback Dan Persa. But an early season loss to Army snowballed into a five-game losing streak. Northwestern did manage to reel off four straight wins – including a 28-25 stunner at Nebraska – but would end up 6-7 after losing yet another bowl game, a 33-22 loss to Texas A&M in the 2011 Meineke Car Care Bowl of Texas.

As the Wildcats prepare to embark on their 2012 season, I have mixed feelings about this team, one that I thought could be a dark horse at this time last year. Some things about Northwestern have me thinking it can be a decent squad in a brutal Legends Division. But the more I think about it, the more I feel the Wildcats take a step back and find themselves in jeopardy of a fifth straight bowl appearance.

Northwestern has a quarterback in junior Kain Colter that should excite the Wildcat fan base. Colter started the first three games of last season while Persa continued to recover from his Achilles' injury and found himself throwing at least one pass in all but three contests in 2011. He completed 55-

of-82 pass attempts for 673 yards and tossed six touchdowns to only one interception.

Now here's the concern: Among Wildcat players returning in 2012, Colter also has the most rushing and receiving yards. He proved to be versatile enough to 654 yards and nine touchdowns on the ground, as well as catch 43 passes for 466 yards and three receiving touchdowns. In other words, he accounted for 18 of Northwestern's touchdowns last year.

If there's a good thing here for the Wildcats, it's that Colter is the clear cut No. 1 quarterback and has worked as such throughout the offseason. But when your quarterback also has more rushing yards than any current running back and more receiving yards than any other wide receiver, that doesn't speak well to the depth of your entire offense.

Junior running back Mike Trumphy is coming off an ACL injury that caused him to miss Northwestern's last 10 games, while sophomore Treyvon Green is currently recovering from a chest injury. If either isn't ready for the Wildcats' opener, junior Venric Mark could be starting initially. Green had 362 yards rushing and four touchdowns last season, while Mark had 104 yards and one touchdown on the ground. The best case scenario would be if Trumphy could emerge, but regardless, fluidity at this position could be likely.

The receiving corps took a huge hit losing both Jeremy Ebert and Drake Dunsmore to graduation. Ebert led the team in receiving with 75 catches for 1,060 yards and 11 touchdowns, all of which were fourth or higher among all Big Ten wideouts. Dunsmore, who thrived in Northwestern's "super back" role, had 45 catches for 522 yards and six touchdowns en route to winning the conference's Kwalick-Clark Tight End of the Year award in 2011.

Senior wideout Demetrius Fields will fill the void left by Ebert after a 32-catch season that included 382 yards

receiving and three touchdowns, but who replaces Dunsmore at super back features intrigue. One other significant name to watch for is junior Kyle Prater, who has been deemed eligible for this season after transferring from USC. Prater was a highly-touted recruit in high school and if he's able to live up to his billing, it would be an enormous boost for Colter and this Wildcat offense.

Good news along the offensive line is that the entire left side features players who started every game in 2011 for Northwestern. Senior Patrick Ward started at right tackle the past two years, but switched over to left tackle in the offseason. Senior Brian Mulroe returns at left guard and sophomore Brandon Vitabile is back at center. For an area that had plenty of continuity last year, this is one that has promise if the right side of the line can get shored up.

The Wildcats return a pair of defensive ends that featured one starting in each game last season. Junior Tyler Scott started Northwestern's first six games at left end, while senior Quentin Williams started the last seven at right end. Both are expected to occupy those respective spots again. Meanwhile, senior Brian Arnfelt did get to start at defensive tackle in the bowl game against Texas A&M and junior Will Hampton made one start at defensive tackle against Eastern Illinois. If both start up front, Northwestern will have a veteran front four.

The strength of this defense comes in its linebacking corps, which is led by senior David Nwabuisi. He was third on the team with 84 tackles and made starts at both middle and outside spots. Junior Damien Proby had 60 tackles and took over the middle linebacker position halfway through the season for Nwabuisi. If both are starters, which is likely, Proby will remain in the middle and Nwabuisi on the outside. Sophomore Collin Ellis started nine games last year and is in competition for the third spot with fellow sophomore Chi Chi Ariguzo.

Northwestern lost first-team all-Big Ten safety Brian Peters and cornerback Jordan Mabin off last year's team, leaving two big questions at those spots. Sophomore safety Ibraheim Campbell had 100 tackles as a redshirt freshman last season, which led the entire team. Senior Demetrius Dugar looks to occupy one of the corner spots in 2012, while junior Davion Fleming is a likely candidate to replace Peters at safety alongside Campbell.

As far as special teams is concerned, the Wildcats return plenty of experience. Junior punter Brandon Williams tied for third in the Big Ten averaging 40.8 yards per punt last season, doing so on 52 attempts. Northwestern also brings back two kickers – senior Steve Flaherty and junior Jeff Budzien. Flaherty handled kickoff duties while Budzien was used for field goals and PATs. The return game features Mark, who had 915 yards on kickoff returns in 2011.

Northwestern is the only Big Ten team that plays three BCS opponents in the non-conference part of its season, opening with a game at Syracuse, followed by consecutive home games against Vanderbilt and Boston College. While all three are winnable contests, this will not be easy for the Wildcats. The home opener against Vanderbilt in particular will be telling as the Commodores were in the Liberty Bowl last year.

The Big Ten portion begins with Indiana at home and consecutive road trips to Penn State and Minnesota. It shouldn't be surprising if Northwestern enters its Oct. 20 home game against No. 17 Nebraska with a 7-0 record, but the odds of this actually happening are slim. It's not whether the Wildcats lose any of their first seven games, but how many of them they lose because they can't afford another early-season clunker like the one they had at Army in 2011.

Getting Nebraska and Iowa both at Ryan Field in late October helps, but Northwestern couldn't have a more brutal stretch to end the season, playing consecutive road games at No. 8

Michigan and No. 13 Michigan State, followed by its home finale against an Illinois squad who had won the last two head-to-head match-ups.

How the Wildcats start 2012 will be real indicative of how this season unfolds. The potential's there, but realistically speaking, this might prove to be a daunting season for head coach Pat Fitzgerald and his team.

AUDIO: [Northwestern QB Kain Colter](#)