

# 2012 Big Ten football previews: Minnesota (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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After examining [Penn State](#), [Ohio State](#), [Indiana](#), [Illinois](#), [Purdue](#), [Wisconsin](#) and [Northwestern](#), we now shift our attention to the Minnesota Golden Gophers. Iowa plays its Homecoming Game against Minnesota at Kinnick Stadium on Sept. 29.

By no means is Minnesota a team that's going to compete for the Legends Division crown this year, but it's definitely a team on the rise entering Jerry Kill's second season as head coach.

The Golden Gophers went 3-9 in 2011, but managed to beat both Iowa and Illinois for the second consecutive year to account for their two victories in Big Ten play. Given the landscape of the conference and given the improvements that are typically made between the first and second years of coaching regimes, Minnesota might have a realistic opportunity to reach the six-win plateau this year and make its first bowl appearance since 2009.

One position of stability with this offense comes at quarterback with MarQueis Gray returning for his senior year. As a full-time quarterback his junior season, Gray threw for 1,495 yards, eight touchdowns and eight interceptions. He also rushed for 966 yards on 199 carries and had six touchdowns on the ground. Now that he's more comfortable in the Golden Gophers' offense, I expect his numbers across the board to be better this fall.

At running back, Minnesota will likely be using a rotation that features sophomore Donnell Kirkwood and junior James

Gillum, who transferred to Minnesota from Mississippi Gulf Coast Junior College. Playing at the JUCO level last year, Gillum rushed for 1,042 yards and nine touchdowns. Kirkwood appeared in all 12 of the Golden Gophers' games in 2011, rushing for 229 yards on 63 carries and posting three touchdowns.

The receiving corps took a big hit losing Da'Jon McKnight, who was far and away Minnesota's best wideout last season. McKnight had team highs of 51 catches, 760 yards receiving, and four touchdowns. No other receiver on the team even had 20 catches, 200 yards receiving and/or three touchdowns.

Senior Brandon Green is the most experienced wideout of the bunch, catching 15 passes for 190 yards and one touchdown. Junior Malcolm Moulton and sophomore Devin Crawford-Tufts are two receivers who could see playing time this fall, as well as freshman Andre McDonald, who was one of the top 2012 recruits from the state of Minnesota. Senior John Rabe will likely be the Golden Gophers' tight end this fall after catching four passes for 36 yards and two touchdowns as a junior.

Up front, Minnesota has a group of offensive linemen that could be fairly decent this fall. Junior Ed Olson returns at left tackle and his younger brother Tommy Olson is in contention to start right next to him at left guard. Two other names to keep an eye on along the line are sophomores Zac Epping and Caleb Bak. Epping started the last eight games at right guard while Bak started the last four contests of 2011 at left guard in place of Tommy Olson.

Along the defensive line, the Golden Gophers are experienced at both end spots. Sophomore Ben Perry started all 12 games last season at one of the D-end spots, while senior D.L. Wilhite started nine games at the other. Wilhite only posted 16 tackles, but was second on the team with three sacks. Perry recorded 15 tackles in 2011. Junior Ra'Shede Hageman has a good shot at being one of the starting defensive tackles after

recording 13 tackles last year as a reserve.

Minnesota's top two returning tacklers from last season – seniors Mike Rallis and Keanon Cooper – are both back to lead the linebacking corps in 2012. Rallis will once again take over the middle spot after recording 83 tackles as junior. Cooper will be one of the Golden Gophers playing on the outside following a season where he compiled 77 tackles in nine games. Senior Spencer Reeves is the favorite to command the other outside spot, filling the shoes of the late Gary Tinsley, who tragically died in April just over four months after playing his final game in a Minnesota uniform.

The secondary receives a huge boost this year with the return of senior cornerback Troy Stoudemire, who was granted a medical redshirt after only appearing in four games last season. Stoudemire had 24 tackles and two interceptions for the Golden Gophers prior to his season-ending broken arm injury. In 2010, he had 37 tackles, an interception, five pass break ups, two forced fumbles and two fumble recoveries. He also handled Minnesota's kickoff return duties and was highly regarded as the best return man in the entire Big Ten through the course of his career, so his return will be beneficial on multiple fronts.

Junior Brock Vereen also returns after recording 67 tackles and starting at cornerback in all 12 of Minnesota's games last year. However, Vereen has switched over to play safety this year, making senior Michael Carter a possibility to start at the other cornerback spot opposite Stoudemire. Sophomore Derrick Wells will likely start at safety alongside Vereen.

Minnesota has a battle going on at kicker between junior Chris Hawthorne and senior Jordan Wettstein. Hawthorne was the kicker for the first seven games and was 6-of-9 on field goal tries. Wettstein was a perfect 6-of-6 with field goals, which included a long of 51 yards that came in the regular season finale against Illinois. Both had nearly identical numbers

with kickoffs. Junior Dan Orseske returns to handle punting duties for the third consecutive season. In 2011, Orseske averaged 37 yards per punt and had 32 of his 57 punts either land inside the opponents' 20-yard line or fair caught.

The Golden Gophers' schedule features a slate of non-conference games that are all winnable, starting with a road trip to UNLV on Aug. 30 before playing three straight at home between New Hampshire, Western Michigan and Syracuse. Minnesota could conceivably be 4-0 when it enters Kinnick Stadium looking to win its third straight Floyd of Rosedale battle with Iowa. If the Golden Gophers are going to be a bowl team in 2012, wins in non-conference will be important to obtain.

Following that Big Ten opener against the Hawkeyes, Minnesota gets Northwestern and Purdue to visit TCF Bank Stadium in the month of October, with a road game at No. 12 Wisconsin sandwiched in-between. November will be brutal with a trip to Illinois, followed by Legends Division contests against No. 8 Michigan, at No. 17 Nebraska, and against No. 13 Michigan State to conclude the regular season.

I honestly don't think it's out of the realm of possibility that the Golden Gophers go 6-6 and play in something like the Little Caesars Bowl this season. If Minnesota can start 4-0, all it would need to do is win two games in Big Ten play, which is exactly what it did last season when it was considered one of the worst teams in the entire conference.

I expect the Golden Gophers to be better in 2012, mainly because I believe Kill is a far better head coach than his Minnesota predecessor. It might not show in the Big Ten standings, but this team is on the rise and should it find bowl eligibility this season, things might continue to get better in the years ahead.

**AUDIO:** [Minnesota QB MarQueis Gray](#)