

2012 Big Ten football previews: Nebraska (premium)

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Thus far in our Big Ten season preview series, we have discussed [Penn State](#), [Ohio State](#), [Indiana](#), [Illinois](#), [Purdue](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Northwestern](#) and [Minnesota](#). We now turn our attention to the No. 17 Nebraska Cornhuskers. Iowa will play against Nebraska on Nov. 23 at Kinnick Stadium.

In its first season as a Big Ten member last year, Nebraska was solid. The Cornhuskers didn't win the Legends Division, but they still won nine games and played in the Capital One Bowl, losing 30-13 to South Carolina. Now entering Year Two of Big Ten play, Nebraska's a team that has pieces in place to make a legitimate run at winning its division and playing in the Big Ten Championship Game on Dec. 1. While I don't think personally think the Cornhuskers will win the conference or division for that matter, I get the optimism surrounding this team.

At quarterback, Nebraska has junior Taylor Martinez. His passing mechanics leave a lot to be desired, but what he does for the Cornhuskers' rushing game makes up for any throwing deficiencies there might be. Martinez threw for 2,089 yards but only had 13 touchdowns and also tossed eight interceptions. However, he did compile 874 yards on the ground and had nine rushing touchdowns as well. Basically, Martinez gives you good and bad. If Nebraska is able to improve its passing game in any matter, then he could have a big year.

Also providing an enormous boost to the Cornhusker rushing attack is senior running back Rex Burkhead. In 2011, Burkhead rushed for 1,357 yards on 281 carries – good for third in the

conference – as well as 15 touchdowns. His best performance of the season came in Nebraska's regular season finale against Iowa, as Burkhead had 160 yards rushing on a Cornhusker single-game record of 38 carries. Once again, he'll be the one player opposing defenses will game plan for and another 1,000-yard season out of him should prove beneficial to Nebraska.

The one name to watch in the receiving corps this fall will be sophomore Kenny Bell. As a freshman, Bell led the Cornhuskers in receiving with 32 catches for 461 yards receiving and three touchdowns. Also coming back in 2012 is junior Quincy Enunwa, who had 21 catches for 293 receiving yards and a pair of TDs. Nebraska will also have the benefit of two experienced tight ends that could be incorporated in the passing game as well – seniors Ben Cotton and Kyler Reed. This duo combined for 29 catches and 446 receiving yards in 2011. The offensive numbers might not be staggering, but the Cornhuskers have options on this side of the ball.

Up front, Nebraska loses its center and both starting tackles from one year ago. Junior Cole Pensick has a chance to take over at center for previous two-year starter Mike Caputo. The experience comes at the guard positions, where three names to watch are junior Spencer Long (who started every game at right guard in 2011), senior Seung Hoon Choi and junior Andrew Rodriguez. Another name that could re-emerge along this Cornhusker offensive line is junior Jeremiah Sirles, who was a reserve last year, but started every game at tackle back in 2010.

As for the defensive line, the bad news here is Nebraska no longer has Jared Crick, who was taken in last spring's NFL Draft by the Houston Texans. Crick saw his senior season cut short due to injury, but he was the heart and soul of that defensive line. If there is good news though, it's that first-year defensive line coach (and former Iowa assistant) Rick Kaczinski has a pair of seniors along the front four that can be depended on.

One of those guys is defensive end Cameron Meredith, who has started 27 straight games at defensive end for the Cornhuskers. Last year, Meredith recorded 58 tackles and was second on the team with five sacks. Inside, Nebraska will have the services of Baker Steinkuhler, who had 40 tackles and two sacks during his junior campaign.

The linebacking corps is similar to the front four in that it's a good news/bad news scenario for the Cornhuskers. The good is that they return a pair of seniors here in middle linebacker Will Compton and outside linebacker Sean Fisher. The bad, however, is Nebraska no longer features Lavonte David, who was a third-round pick of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers after leading the Cornhuskers in tackles, tackles for loss, sacks, interceptions, forced fumbles and fumble recoveries. In other words, his loss is huge. Compton was the second-leading tackler on the team with 82 of them, while Fisher had 24 tackles.

Nebraska's secondary also lost a big-time cornerback in Alfonzo Dennard, who was selected in the NFL Draft by the New England Patriots following a season where he had 31 tackles and six pass break ups. The defensive backfield also lost safety Austin Cassidy, who had 70 tackles in 2011. Senior safety Daimion Stafford is the name to watch from this group though in 2012 after coming in last season and compiling 80 tackles and a team-high 10 pass break ups. The Cornhuskers will need to figure out the direction they'll go at corner, which is why there's probably more concern here than with any other part of the defense.

If there's one area where Nebraska might be the conference's best team, it's special teams. The Cornhuskers possess the Big Ten's top specialist from last year in senior Brett Maher, who handled both the kicking and punting duties for this team. Maher made 19-of-23 field goal tries and contributed 100 of Nebraska's points in 2011, more than any other kicker on any other Big Ten team. He also led the conference with an average

of 44.5 yards per punt on 59 attempts. Nebraska also has one of the league's top return men in sophomore Ameer Abdullah, who averaged 29.3 yards per kickoff return as a freshman.

Now, looking at Nebraska's schedule, the Cornhuskers have a semi-tough non-conference slate that features home games against Southern Miss and Arkansas State and a road trip on Sept. 8 to UCLA. Nebraska should be 4-0 when it hosts No. 12 Wisconsin on Sept. 29 in a primetime game that will feature the Cornhuskers looking for payback after being thumped in their inaugural Big Ten contest 48-17 by the Badgers last season.

It only gets more grueling from there though as October features two more night games – one at No. 18 Ohio State and one at Memorial Stadium on Oct. 27 against No. 8 Michigan. After that home contest with the Wolverines, Nebraska has to play at No. 13 Michigan State the following weekend. The season concludes with the second annual "Heroes Game" against Iowa that will take place on the Friday after Thanksgiving.

Again, Nebraska's one of three teams that I think has a realistic chance of winning the Legends Division this season. I just don't see it happening. With that being said though, the Cornhuskers could be a team that benefits by season's end if the Big Ten successfully has two BCS teams again in 2012 and Nebraska has the type of season many believe it can have. The offense should be better, but the question will be how much better the defense can be after being subpar last year.

AUDIO: [Nebraska RB Rex Burkhead](#)