

2012 Big Ten football previews: Michigan (premium)

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We've discussed [Penn State](#), [Ohio State](#), [Indiana](#), [Illinois](#), [Purdue](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Northwestern](#), [Minnesota](#), [Nebraska](#) and [Michigan State](#). Now our attention shifts to the No. 8 Michigan Wolverines. Iowa visits Michigan Stadium in Ann Arbor, Mich., on Nov. 17.

Year One of the Brady Hoke era at Michigan proved to be a far greater success than many envisioned it being. While the Wolverines didn't win the Big Ten – or the Legends Division – for that matter, they did manage to finish with a 11-2 mark that was capped by a 23-20 overtime win in the Sugar Bowl over Virginia Tech last January.

As Michigan enters 2012, expectations around the program are the highest they've been since Lloyd Carr's tenure. On paper, this is probably the most talented team in the entire Big Ten this year. The Wolverines are also my pick to represent the conference on New Year's Day at the 2013 Rose Bowl in Pasadena, Calif.

Let's start with the fact that Michigan returns the Big Ten's most dynamic player in senior quarterback Denard Robinson. Does he have a great arm? Not really. But I got to say I was impressed with the strides he made last season. While he was clearly a better fit for the Wolverines when Rich Rodriguez was the head coach, Hoke managed to find a balance with Robinson that still allowed him to make plays in an offense not nearly as suited for him. Because of Hoke, Robinson became mentally tougher and as a result, he's a more confident quarterback now.

Statistically speaking, Robinson didn't quite have the numbers last season he had as a sophomore in 2010. But he did managed to throw for more touchdowns while completing fewer passes and he actually rushed for more touchdowns despite fewer carries. The talent around him also got better and looks to still be better in 2012. This is something I see playing to his benefit again this year.

It appears Michigan has finally found a clear-cut No. 1 running back in junior Fitzgerald Toussaint, but he's currently serving a suspension after a DUI arrest this offseason. Last year, he came on in the season's second half and wound up rushing for 1,041 yards and nine touchdowns. When Toussaint returns, he gives the Wolverines even more punch to their ground attack.

The receiving corps took a hit losing leading receiver Junior Hemingway, who had 34 catches for 699 yards and four touchdowns in 2011. Junior wideout Jeremy Gallon is back following a season where he had 31 catches, 453 yards and three touchdowns, but the pressure on being the No. 1 receiver falls squarely on the shoulders of senior Roy Roundtree.

Last year, Roundtree hauled in 19 catches and had 355 yards receiving and two scores, one of which was the game-winning touchdown against Notre Dame. But he also changed his number to No. 21, the same number worn by Desmond Howard during his Heisman Trophy winning 1991 season. Roundtree has to evolve into that true No. 1 threat in order for Michigan to fully reach its potential.

Up front, the Wolverines will be led by junior left tackle Taylor Lewan, one of three returning starters along the offensive line. Also back are senior right guard Patrick Omameh and junior left guard Michael Schofield. However, Michigan has a massive void at center left by David Molk, who won the Rimington Trophy in 2011 as the nation's top center. The name to watch at center this year will likely be senior

Ricky Barnum, who hasn't been a regular starter along the line but has plenty of experience.

Molk was the huge loss on offense. On defense, it's defensive tackle Mike Martin. Last season, Martin compiled 64 tackles and 3.5 sacks leading a Wolverine defense that resurrected back into a respected group under defensive coordinator Greg Mattison after spending three years as a complete laughingstock.

While Michigan returns seven defensive starters, three of the four who aren't returning are along the front four – including Martin. The Wolverines also lose the services of Ryan Van Bergen, who started games at both the tackle and end spots and recorded 45 tackles as well as a team-high 5.5 sacks in 2011. Senior defensive end Craig Roh will be counted on to lead this inexperienced group after finishing with 32 tackles and four sacks while starting every game as a junior.

If there is good news for this defense, it's returning the trio of linebackers that started the majority of Michigan's games in 2011. The clear leader of this linebacking corps is senior middle linebacker Kenny Demens, who led the Wolverines with 94 tackles last season and also recorded three sacks. Joining him are a pair of sophomores in Desmond Morgan and Jake Ryan. Morgan finished with 63 tackles while Ryan had 37 tackles as well as a pair of fumble recoveries.

The secondary returns three starters, with the mainstay being senior strong safety Jordan Kovacs. After finishing second in the Big Ten with 116 tackles two years ago, Kovacs had 75 tackles in 2011, as well as four sacks. Again, this is a strong safety. Michigan also brings back junior free safety Thomas Gordon, who had 67 tackles and four fumble recoveries, as well as senior cornerback J.T. Floyd, who had 48 tackles and led the defense with eight pass break ups and two interceptions. Most likely to join the defensive backfield in 2012 is sophomore cornerback Blake Countess, who recorded 44

tackles and broke up six passes as a freshman.

As for special teams, junior punter Will Hagerup, junior kicker Brendan Gibbons and sophomore kicker Matt Wile are all back. Hagerup averaged 36 yards per punt, while Gibbons connected on 13-of-17 field goals last season, including the game-winner in the Sugar Bowl. Wile began the season handling punting duties while Hagerup served an early-season suspension and was Michigan's kickoff specialist, a role he'll keep in 2012. Gallon will likely be the main player to watch in the return game for both punts and kickoffs.

Onto the schedule, which make no mistake, is brutal. The Wolverines open the season at Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, Texas against defending BCS national champion Alabama, who enters this season ranked second nationally. As if that's not enough, Michigan also plays at Notre Dame in what will be a prime time game in South Bend and the Big Ten slate features road games at No. 17 Nebraska on Oct. 27 and of course, the regular season finale Nov. 24 at No. 18 Ohio State.

Now it's conceivable that the Wolverines lose all four of those games being played away from the Big House, and still do enough to win the Legends Division and play in the Big Ten Championship Game on Dec. 1 in Indianapolis since Alabama and Notre Dame are both non-conference. The key game, strangely enough, is the one big game Michigan does get at home – Oct. 20 against No. 13 Michigan State.

The Spartans have won the last four meetings between these teams and while Michigan State looks to have another stout team in place this season, this year's contest at the Big House is Michigan's best chance at winning since its last victory over the Spartans in 2007. If the Wolverines are able to prevail here – and I think they will – I have a hard time seeing them not winning the Legends Division.

Should Michigan draw No. 12 Wisconsin in the Big Ten title

game like many (including myself) are anticipating, I believe the combination of experience the Wolverines are getting this season playing mammoth games away from the Big House, as well as the overall talent they possess, bodes well enough that they dethrone the Badgers and come up smelling roses in 2012, even if they take a 9-4 record with them to Pasadena.

AUDIO: [Michigan QB Denard Robinson](#)