

2012-13 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Minnesota (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

The Big Ten kicks off its 2012-13 men's college basketball season next week, so this week, *HawkeyeDrive.com* will give you rundowns on all 12 conference teams. Today, we'll showcase [Michigan State](#) and Minnesota. The Golden Gophers will play Iowa twice this season – Feb. 3 at Williams Arena in Minneapolis, Minn., and Feb. 17 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

As painful as it was for Minnesota fans to watch the Golden Gophers in the final weeks of conference play last season, this team showed signs of life in March. Not only did Minnesota beat Northwestern and take Michigan to overtime during the Big Ten Tournament, but it took advantage of its invite to the NIT by advancing to the final game, where it lost to Stanford. Prior to that season-ending defeat at Madison Square Garden, the Golden Gophers won road games at LaSalle, Miami (Fla.) and Middle Tennessee State, plus beat Pac-12 regular season champion Washington in the semifinals.

Entering 2012-13, there's plenty of reason for fans of this team to feel optimistic. Minnesota comes into this season just on the outside of the preseason top 25 and at least on paper, this year's squad has the look of one that should be playing in the NCAA Tournament.

One of the major reasons this didn't occur last season was the absence of forward Trevor Mbakwe. After a stellar junior season in 2010-11 where he led the Big Ten in rebounding, the 6-8 forward tore his ACL in a loss to Dayton at the Old Spice

Classic, ending his 2011-12 campaign. Mbakwe was granted a medical redshirt however, making him eligible to play as a senior this season.

During the offseason, Mbakwe faced legal trouble, but not enough for head coach Tubby Smith to suspend him for any games. As long as Mbakwe stays out of trouble off the court and avoids injury on the court, he's a difference-maker for this team.

Two other players that will be counted on to provide similar leadership for the Golden Gophers are senior forward Rodney Williams and sophomore guard Andre Hollins. Not coincidentally, these were the same two players who took their games to another level in March when Minnesota made its runs in both the Big Ten tourney and NIT.

In Mbakwe's absence, Williams led the Golden Gophers in both scoring and rebounding. With this front court duo back, Minnesota presents match-up problems in the post. As for Hollins, it wasn't as much statistically what he was doing as it was the poise he demonstrated playing the point. He began playing more consistently and if he can pick up where he left off at the end of last season, this year could be a big one for him.

Minnesota also features plenty of playing experience across its roster. Of the 10 Golden Gopher players to start games last season, nine of them are back this season. Senior guard Julian Welch led the team in assists. Sophomore guard Joe Coleman has a knack for crashing the boards. Junior guard Austin Hollins started all but one game last season. Sophomore center Elliott Eliason gives Minnesota height in its front court and could benefit heavily when Smith opts to play a bigger lineup.

The Golden Gophers will be testing themselves in non-conference play. Highlighting that portion of the schedule is

participating in the Battle 4 Atlantis, with Minnesota's first game in that coming Thanksgiving Day against No. 8 Duke. It will also be playing either No. 17 Memphis or VCU the following day. The Big Ten/ACC Challenge pits the Golden Gophers against Florida State in Tallahassee. The Seminoles lost in the third round of the NCAA Tournament last season.

As for Big Ten play, it will once again come down to the month of February for Minnesota, which has been unkind the last two seasons to Smith and his players. That month features a pair of games against Iowa, who swept the Golden Gophers last season. It also includes four games – two home and two road – against teams ranked in the preseason top 25. One of those games is a single-play at No. 4 Ohio State on Feb. 20. Minnesota also has a single-play in January with No. 5 Michigan, but that game will be at Williams Arena.

Bottom line here is the pressure is on Smith to get it done this season. He has a good enough nucleus in place. If the Golden Gophers end the season differently than they have the previous two campaigns, this team should reach the Field of 68. If this team fades into oblivion again, however, then one has to wonder if Smith's time in Minneapolis would be up.