

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

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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 Ohio State and [Wisconsin](#). The Buckeyes come into this season ranked fourth nationally and will only play Iowa once on Jan. 22 at Value City Arena in Columbus, Ohio.

If there's one Big Ten program that has shown consistency over the past several seasons, it has been Ohio State. Last season culminated with the Buckeyes reaching the Final Four for the second time under head coach Thad Matta. Ohio State did this as a No. 2 seed in its region, but ultimately lost its Final Four match-up to Kansas, who was also a No. 2 seed.

Entering 2012-13, expectations remain high for the Buckeyes, even without the services of players like William Buford and Jared Sullinger, who went to the NBA following his sophomore season and was a first-round pick of the Boston Celtics. The good news for Ohio State is that there are two key pieces from last year's squad both back for their junior years this season – guard Aaron Craft and forward Deshaun Thomas, both of whom were selected preseason all-Big Ten.

Craft is coming off a season where he led the Buckeyes in both assists (181) and steals (98) and was named the Big Ten's Defensive Player of the Year. He's as good a point guard as there in the conference and he's the key to the engine once again this year. Meanwhile, Thomas had an enormous sophomore

season finishing second to Sullinger in both points and rebounds. He was named a preseason All-American recently and after a strong showing in the NCAA Tournament last March, Thomas is the headline player on this year's squad.

Another key returnee is junior guard Lenzelle Smith, Jr. Like both Craft and Thomas, Smith, Jr. started all 39 of the Buckeyes' games in 2011-12. He averaged 6.8 points and 4.6 rebounds per game and his 78 assists were second on the team to Craft. Smith, Jr.'s role will be bigger this season and when opponents look to double-team Thomas in the post, he's the guy that will have to get it going shooting-wise.

One thing Ohio State will be able to utilize this season unlike in past seasons though is depth. Under Matta, the Buckeyes had been known as a team that maybe went 6-7 players deep on most nights. Matta said at Big Ten Basketball Media Day that more players would be involved this season.

The lone senior on this year's squad is forward Evan Ravenel. Averaging 10 minutes per game off the bench (he did start three games last season), Ravenel shot over 50 percent from the floor and close to 70 percent from the free-throw line. It wouldn't be a surprise for his role to be expanded this season, even if he remains a sub.

Sophomore center Amir Williams will likely be the starter inside. Williams is the tallest player on the team at 6-11 and appeared in 29 games last season. He was second on the team with 23 blocked shots (only Sullinger had more).

Williams probably won't be the other sophomore starting this season. Ohio State has a guard in LaQuinton Ross who only appeared in nine games last season. Also in the mix would be forward Sam Thompson, who did play in all of the Buckeyes' games last year. The Buckeyes also have sophomore guard Shannon Scott, who was second on the team in assists and likely a reserve again this season filling in for Craft.

Ohio State's non-conference schedule features two big time match-ups, both of which are rematches of games last season. The Buckeyes visit Cameron Indoor Stadium to play No. 8 Duke as part of the Big Ten/ACC Challenge after destroying the Blue Devils at home last season. Then there's Dec. 22, when that same Kansas squad that beat Ohio State twice – both in the regular season at Allen Fieldhouse and in the aforementioned Final Four contest – visits Value City Arena.

As far as the conference schedule goes, there aren't any stretches that appear top-heavy. The Buckeyes' single-plays are at home against Iowa and Minnesota and on the road against Purdue and Penn State. If there is a key stretch for this team, it starts in late January with a home game against No. 23 Wisconsin. One week after that contest with the Badgers, Ohio State plays at No. 5 Michigan and at home against No. 1 Indiana. The Buckeyes play all three of those teams, plus No. 14 Michigan State, twice each.

It's hard to say if Ohio State's going to be able to win the conference yet again, but the talent is there. This might not be a Final Four team again like it was last season, but this remains a group to be reckon with.