

2012-13 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Illinois (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 Illinois and [Penn State](#). The Fighting Illini only play Iowa once this season, with the meeting taking place on March 5 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

Following a 2011-12 campaign that absolutely spiraled out of control, Illinois decided to take a different direction coaching. Gone is Bruce Weber, who was fired after eight seasons that included a trip to the NCAA Championship Game against North Carolina in 2005. Weber is now at Kansas State. The man taking on the task of replacing him at Illinois, John Groce, enters a situation that seems kind of unpredictable right now.

Groce enters his first season at Illinois after serving as the head coach at Ohio. Last season, he guided the Bobcats to NCAA tournament wins over Michigan and South Florida before they were defeated in the Sweet 16 by North Carolina. He also has Big Ten ties, having served as an assistant coach to Thad Matta at Ohio State prior to becoming Ohio's head coach.

As far as player personnel goes, Illinois has enough talent to be a respectable team in the Big Ten and one that could maybe be a bubble team come February and March. The big name missing from last year's squad is Meyers Leonard, who left early for the NBA and was a first-round draft pick of the Portland Trail

Blazers last summer.

Illinois' strength in 2012-13 will be its backcourt, led by a pair of seniors – guards Brandon Paul and D.J. Richardson. Paul led the Fighting Illini in scoring last season, averaging 14.7 points per game. He also led the team with 94 assists and 46 steals. He was even second behind Leonard in blocks despite being nine inches shorter, as well as rebounds. Meanwhile, Richardson is coming off a season where he started all but one game and averaged 11.6 points per contest.

Paul and Richardson averaged the most minutes of any Illinois player in 2011-12 and will likely do so again this season. They were also the team's two best 3-pointers and will continue to be who the offense is based around, even with Groce's style of play being different from Weber's.

Two other guards that will be bigger factors this season for the Fighting Illini will be junior Joseph Bertrand and sophomore Tracy Abrams. Both started numerous games a year ago and posted similar numbers in terms of assists and steals. They bolster the depth in Illinois' backcourt.

Now as for the front court, the two likely starters are easy to figure out. Sophomore center Nnanna Ekwu will be filling the void left by Leonard, while senior Tyler Griffey will also be more of a contributor in 2012-13. Ekwu only started three games last season, but appeared in all 32 of them and provided the team with 47 percent shooting from the floor and 20 blocked shots. As for Griffey, he started 20 of the 30 games he appeared in and shot 43 percent. Both guys will likely get an increase in looks inside, so if those shooting numbers can remain similar, that would be a good sign for Illinois going forward.

However, the challenge for the Fighting Illini this season is finding depth in the front court with Ekwu and Griffey being the tallest guys on the team and easily the most productive

post players Illinois currently possesses.

In non-conference play, the Fighting Illini have a chance to make noise during the month of November. Illinois will be taking part in the Maui Invitational and could conceivably find itself reaching the championship game if it were to pull an upset of Texas in the semifinals. December is more brutal with games at No. 21 Gonzaga, the annual game in St. Louis against No. 15 Missouri and even a home game Dec. 11 against Norfolk State, who upset Missouri in the NCAA Tournament last March as a 15 seed.

As far as Big Ten play is concerned, the key stretch for this team starts in late January and goes into the first week of February. No. 5 Michigan pays a visit to Assembly Hall on Jan. 27 and that's followed up by a trip to No. 14 Michigan State and home games against No. 23 Wisconsin and No. 1 Indiana. The good news for the Fighting Illini is Michigan State and Indiana are both two of their single-plays again this season.

Expectations for this team should be tempered, especially after the free fall last year and the coaching change that took place. But if team chemistry can be cohesive, this won't be a bad team. It remains to be seen if it'll be an NCAA tournament team again, but anything less than the NIT might be surprising.