

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

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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 Nittany Lions will play Iowa twice this season – Jan. 31 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, and Feb. 14 at the Bryce Jordan Center in State College, Pa.

As Penn State enters Year Two of the Patrick Chambers era, there's slight reason for optimism this winter in State College, Pa. While the Nittany Lions were a team that finished last in the Big Ten during the 2011-12 season, they were also a team that showed flashes of what it could end up becoming under Chambers.

No player provided as much of a spark last season than guard Tim Frazier. Having the monumental task of taking over the leadership role on this team from one of Penn State's best players ever in Talor Battle, Frazier had a season to remember individually speaking. Averaging 37 minutes per game, Frazier led the Nittany Lions in scoring, rebounding, assists and steals last season, en route to being named first-team all-Big Ten. His 6.2 assists per game led the conference and he was the Big Ten's second-leading scorer and second in steals.

Once again, how Penn State plays will revolve around Frazier. But unlike last season where his play took the Big Ten by the storm, opposing teams will be more cognizant of Frazier, meaning other guys around him need to step up.

One player to watch potentially take on a leadership role for the Nittany Lions is junior Jermaine Marshall. The 6-4 guard was second in scoring, averaging 10.8 points per game as a sophomore. He was also second on the team in steals and fourth in rebounding, playing the second-most minutes of any player.

Another name to watch is senior Nick Colella, who had his number of minutes increase significantly during Big Ten play last year. Also adding to the depth in the backcourt will be sophomore guard D.J. Newbill, who begins three seasons of eligibility after transferring from Southern Miss and redshirting last season. Right there, Penn State has four guards to work around.

The front court is an area that will need to be improved in order for the Nittany Lions to avoid the cellar of the Big Ten again this season. Junior forward Sasa Borovnjak and sophomore forward Ross Travis both hauled in triple-figures in rebounding during the 2011-12 campaign while starting a combined 23 games between the two of them. Sophomore forward Jon Graham was close to joining them in that group with 95 boards himself as a freshmen. Those three, along with 6-9 freshman forward Donovan Jack are guys that don't necessarily have the size, but do have the capability of being contributors in the post for Penn State this season.

As far as the schedule goes, the non-conference slate is fairly light, which is a good thing for a Nittany Lion squad trying to take the next step under Chambers. The one obvious challenge comes in the Puerto Rico Tip-Off, opening up against No. 6 North Carolina State. Aside from that game, there are going to be plenty of opportunities to pad up wins for Penn State before entering Big Ten play.

Once entering the conference portion, the challenge will be finding a road victory, something the Nittany Lions were unable to do in 2011-12. Right out of the gate, Penn State has to travel to No. 23 Wisconsin and then play host to No. 1

Indiana. But the challenging stretch is the final seven games, starting with a home game Feb. 14 against Iowa. After that contest with the Hawkeyes, Penn State has to play No. 5 Michigan twice, visit Illinois in between contests with the Wolverines and end the season with trips to Minnesota and Northwestern before playing Wisconsin at home in its regular season finale. One piece of good news here for the Nittany Lions is that two of its single-plays – No. 14 Michigan State and No. 4 Ohio State – both have to visit Bryce Jordan Center.

Expectations shouldn't be too high with Penn State, but this is also a team that could be like Iowa was last season, one that maybe wins a few games it shouldn't (at least on paper) and suddenly emerge quietly as a team that if enough breaks go its way could play in some sort of postseason come March. One thing is certain – Chambers is a coach that as he continues to get his guys meshed into the program will be successful. Penn State isn't a team that anyone in the Big Ten should take lightly.