

2012-13 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Michigan (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 Michigan and [Northwestern](#). The Wolverines come into this season ranked fifth nationally and will only play Iowa once on Jan. 6 at Crisler Center in Ann Arbor, Mich.

After reaching the NCAA Tournament for the first time under John Beilein in 2011, Michigan took an enormous step forward last season, winning a share of the Big Ten regular season crown. What made this feat even more remarkable is that the Wolverines did this despite their best player in 2010-11 – Darius Morris – leaving early for the NBA and having to replace him with a freshman point guard in Trey Burke that proved to be sensational.

Michigan was the No. 2 seed in the Big Ten Tournament, but lost in the semifinals to Ohio State. Then the Wolverines saw their time in the NCAA Tournament short-lived, losing in the second round to 13th-seeded Ohio, who was led by Illinois' new head coach, John Groce.

Now entering 2012-13, expectations are sky high in Ann Arbor. Not only does Michigan enter this season ranked in the preseason top 5, but the Wolverines have many of the key pieces from their success last year back in the fold.

Leading the way is Burke, who opted to return for his

sophomore season after a freshman campaign where he led Michigan in scoring, assists and steals. It wasn't just the numbers Burke was putting up, but how he managed to take over games for the Wolverines in crunch time. He's as good a point guard as there is in the Big Ten and he should only be better this season as well, especially after being named a preseason All-American earlier in the week.

Michigan also returns two other starters from last season in junior guard Tim Hardaway, Jr., and junior forward Jordan Morgan. Hardaway, Jr., was one of two Wolverine players to start all 34 of Michigan's games in 2011-12 and averaged 14.6 points per game, second to Burke's 14.8. Morgan, meanwhile, was the Wolverines' leading rebounder, averaging 5.6 boards per contest. Having both of these guys back provides Michigan with some leadership from its upperclassmen.

As far as replacing players like Zack Novak and Stu Douglass is concerned, the Wolverines' freshmen class is the best Beilein has had since coming over from West Virginia in 2007. It is highlighted by two players – 6-10 forward Mitch McGary and 6-6 forward Glenn Robinson III. McGary was one of the top recruits nationally last year and as a high-school senior, he averaged 12 points and 10 rebounds per game. He's someone that will have an immediate impact in the post for the Wolverines. Robinson, who is the son of former Purdue and NBA player Glenn Robinson, averaged 21.7 points per game as a high-school senior and could easily fill in at the 3-spot for Michigan in its starting lineup if need be.

The Wolverines will also be aided by the return of sophomore forward Jon Horford, who appeared in nine games last season before suffering a season-ending foot injury. Along with Horford in terms of adding depth to Beilein's rotation are a pair of seniors – guard Matt Vogrich and forward Blake McLimans, who both played in all 34 of Michigan's games a year ago.

As far as the schedule is concerned, the non-conference slate is pretty light. The Wolverines are participating in the preseason NIT, but given the rest of the field, they should be the favorite to win that tournament. The marquee game is in November when No. 6 North Carolina State visits Crisler Center. Michigan also gets to play Beilein's old team, West Virginia, on Dec. 15 at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, N.Y.

In Big Ten play, there are two stretches of note. The first four games in February are against the other four Big Ten teams ranked in the preseason top 25, with three of those four contests taking place away from Ann Arbor. A home game Feb. 5 against No. 4 Ohio State is sandwiched between road trips to No. 1 Indiana, No. 23 Wisconsin (one of Michigan's single-plays) and No. 14 Michigan State. The other key stretch is the last three games of the regular season when the calendar turns to March. The Spartans and Hoosiers both visit Crisler Center and in-between is a trip to Purdue.

That last stretch is worth noting because if Michigan is in the thick of the Big Ten race, having those games against Indiana and Michigan State at home could prove crucial. Whether this team has the depth to make another run at a Big Ten title remains to be seen, but the Wolverines definitely have the talent in place.