

2012-13 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Northwestern (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](#) and Northwestern. The Wildcats will play Iowa twice this season – Jan. 13 at Welsh-Ryan Arena in Evanston, Ill., and Feb. 9 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

Once again, Northwestern came oh so close to making its first ever NCAA Tournament last season. But a loss in the first round of the Big Ten Tournament to Minnesota proved to be the final death knell, as the Wildcats found themselves in the NIT once again where they lost in the second round to Pac-12 regular season champion Washington.

As Northwestern enters 2012-13, there are a couple of things to really like about this team. The Wildcats return four of their five starters from a season ago, although the one loss just so happens to be John Shurna, who led the Big Ten in scoring last season and is the school's all-time leading scorer. His loss is a big void that Northwestern will need to fill.

But with that being said, the Wildcats do bring back senior forward Drew Crawford. Last season, Crawford averaged 16.1 points per game, making him the only other player along with Shurna to average double figures in scoring. Statistically speaking, he was neck-and-neck with Shurna and actually shot the ball better both overall and from 3-point range.

The one player who really came on for Northwestern last season though was freshman point guard Dave Sobolewski. He was one of only three players to start all 33 of the Wildcats' games in 2011-12 and led Northwestern in assists with 121 of them. He also averaged 8.3 points per contest and was third on the team in steals. Getting Sobolewski back is huge because he'll likely remain in the upper echelon of Big Ten point guards this season as well.

Another player that should have an enormous impact for the Wildcats again is senior Reggie Hearn. Like Shurna and Sobolewski, Hearn started all 33 games and was this team's best shooter across the board – inside the arc, outside the arc and at the free-throw line. He'll be counted on even more again this season.

With junior guard JerShon Cobb suspended for the entire 2012-13 season, senior guard Alex Marcotullio would be the fourth player with starting experience returning from last year's squad. He actually averaged more minutes per game than Cobb did, so the drop-off here isn't huge.

But the other interesting dynamic surrounding Northwestern is that it features nine players on its roster that are either freshmen or just new to the program altogether like Louisville transfer Jared Swopshire, who has one year of eligibility. Swopshire only started two of Louisville's 39 games last season, but still averaged over 13 minutes a game. Another transfer Northwestern brought in is 6-9 forward Nikola Cerina, who has two seasons of eligibility remaining after transferring from TCU. Cerina started 20 games for the Horned Frogs in 2010-11, averaging six points and five rebounds per game.

Northwestern does have four true freshmen on its roster. The one likely to make the most immediate impact is 6-7 forward Kale Abrahamson, who played his high school in the state of Iowa at West Des Moines Valley. Abrahamson averaged 18.4

points and 5.2 rebounds per game as a high-school senior. The Wildcats also feature a 7-0 center originally from Romania in freshman Alex Olah. Playing at Traders Point Christian Academy in Indiana, Olah averaged a double-double of 18.5 points and 13.1 rebounds per game and also averaged 4.6 blocks per contest.

Looking at Northwestern's non-conference schedule, the Wildcats should likely enter their Dec. 4 contest at No. 19 Baylor unbeaten. After that trip to Waco, Northwestern has a home game Dec. 8 against Butler and later in the month, NIT champion Stanford pays a visit to Welsh-Ryan Arena.

In Big Ten play, it'll be all about how the Wildcats end the season. They get four of their final six games at home, including contests against in-state rival Illinois, a single-play against No. 23 Wisconsin and No. 4 Ohio State at the end of February. The regular season finale is also a single-play contest on the road against No. 14 Michigan State. If Northwestern is a bubble team again this season, the opportunities for big-time wins that could get them in the Field of 68 will be there down the stretch.

The pressure's on head coach Bill Carmody this year. This might be his deepest roster at Northwestern and one of his most talented. That's not to say the Wildcats finally make their first NCAA tournament appearance this coming March, but the pieces are in place for Northwestern to make a run. The question now becomes whether the script finally has a different ending or not.