

2013 Big Ten football previews: Penn State (premium)

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The first team I'll discuss in our series of Big Ten season previews is the Penn State Nittany Lions. Iowa does not play Penn State in 2013.

Once again, Penn State is the one Big Ten team I've found to be the most challenging to dissect as the 2013 season inches closer. A huge reason why is because the Nittany Lions continue to deal with sanctions levied by the NCAA last year that included a postseason ban of four years (this is now the second season) and reductions in scholarships. The latter of these two most notable sanctions is the part that I feel will really begin to become noticeable to those watching this team on fall Saturdays.

Looking back at last season, Penn State's season began how I figured it might with a loss in the season opener at home to Ohio. It got worse the following week with the Nittany Lions losing a game at Virginia where kicker Sam Ficken's numerous misses on both field goal and PAT attempts stood out. But then something happened. Things started clicking offensively and Penn State assembled a far better offense and ended up having a far better season than I could envision in the first year of Bill O'Brien's coaching tenure.

Now entering Year Two under O'Brien, I look at Penn State as a team that shouldn't surprise myself or anyone else no matter how its 2013 season goes. This team has potential to be really good. There's also a good chance of the Nittany Lions taking a

step back.

The biggest question mark surrounding Penn State is who emerges as its starting quarterback. Gone is Matt McGloin, who remarkably led the Big Ten with 24 touchdown passes and was the lone quarterback in the conference to throw for over 3,000 yards in 2012. Now the Nittany Lions have a battle going on between two newcomers – sophomore Tyler Ferguson and true freshman Christian Hackenberg. Ferguson is a junior college transfer from California who threw for 2,614 yards and 22 touchdowns as a freshman at College of the Sequoias last year. Meanwhile, Hackenberg was a five-star recruit considered by many as one of the top high school quarterbacks in the nation and to this date the biggest recruit O'Brien has landed at Penn State.

Beyond QB though, most of the Nittany Lion offense from last season remains intact. The backfield is led by junior running back Zach Zwinak, who led the team with exactly 1,000 yards on the ground and six touchdowns in 2012. The receiving corps returns junior wideout Allen Robinson, who led the Big Ten in just about every receiving category during his sophomore campaign with 77 catches for 1,013 yards and 11 touchdown receptions. Also returning are senior wide receiver Brandon Moseby-Felder and sophomore tight ends Jesse James and Kyle Carter. James was second in touchdown receptions with five of them, while Carter was the Nittany Lions' second-leading receiver behind Robinson, so the use of the tight ends should continue to be big for Penn State.

The offensive line lost a pair of starters, but brings back plenty of experience, particularly on the left side. Donovan Smith started nine games as a freshman at left tackle last season, while Miles Dieffenbach returns for his junior campaign after starting 11 games at left guard. Seniors Ty Howle and Adam Gress both made starts last season and are the likely candidates to start for Penn State in 2013 at center and right tackle, respectively. The best lineman of the bunch

though is senior right guard John Urschel, who is coming off a 2012 season where he was first-team all-Big Ten.

While the offense appears to be in decent shape, it's the Nittany Lion defense surrounded with questions. For starters, Penn State promoted John Butler to defensive coordinator during the offseason to replace Ted Roof after Butler served as the team's secondary coach.

If there is good news regarding the Penn State defense, it's that three of its four starters in the secondary from last year are back in 2013. Stephen Obeng-Agyapong had offseason shoulder surgery, but the senior is back at safety along with fellow senior Malcolm Willis, which allows junior Adrian Amos to return back to his normal spot at cornerback. The challenge will be finding someone to replace Stephon Morris, who led all defensive backs in 2012 in both tackles (60) and pass break-ups (5).

The defensive line returns a pair of starters in DaQuan Jones and Deion Barnes, who led the Nittany Lions with 10 sacks a season ago as a redshirt freshman. However, it no longer features Jordan Hill, who was considered by many to be one of the Big Ten's best defensive linemen last year after compiling 64 tackles and 4.5 sacks.

Finally, there's the linebacking corps, which took the biggest hit of any group. Gone are Penn State's top two leading tacklers from 2012 – Gerald Hodges and Michael Mauti, who were two of the biggest influences in keeping last year's group together during a timeframe where players were free to transfer wherever without having to redshirt. Not only did these guys lead the Nittany Lions in tackles, but Hodges also had a team-high seven pass break ups and Mauti had a team-high three interceptions.

The one returnee at linebacker is in the middle with senior Glenn Carson, who was third in tackles last year behind Hodges

and Mauti. Also returning with a little bit of experience at least is junior Mike Hull, who started the last game against Wisconsin in place of an injured Mauti and had a 2012 campaign consisting of 58 tackles, four sacks and two fumble recoveries.

On special teams, Penn State brings back a pair of returners in juniors Jesse Della Valle and Bill Belton, plus the aforementioned Ficken at kicker and senior Alex Butterworth returns as the Nittany Lions' punter in 2013.

In terms of the schedule, Penn State has a rather difficult opener against Syracuse at MetLife Stadium that could end up being telling as far as the direction its season heads. Also featured on the non-conference slate is UCF, who visits Beaver Stadium this year and then faces the Nittany Lions again next year in Dublin, Ireland. The Big Ten slate will be more of a challenge as well with home games against Michigan and Nebraska, and road trips to current Leaders Division rivals Ohio State and Wisconsin.

Overall, the amount of starting experience returning this year has to be encouraging for O'Brien. But the question becomes what happens should Penn State find itself getting decimated with injuries over the course of 2013? It's a hypothetical, yes, but given the reduction of only being allotted 65 scholarship players, this is a fair question to ask because it's the one thing that could keep Penn State from having another season like it had in 2012.

AUDIO:

Bill O'Brien, Penn State head coach – <http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Bill-OBrien-2013-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>

John Urschel, Penn State right guard – <http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/John-Urschel-2013-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>