

2013 Big Ten football previews: Illinois (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

After looking at [Penn State](#) on Sunday, we turn our attention to previewing the upcoming season for the Illinois Fighting Illini. Iowa does not play Illinois in 2013.

The first year of the Tim Beckman era at Illinois proved to be a complete disaster as the Fighting Illini, a team that had won two consecutive bowl games prior to 2012, went just 2-10 last season. The road schedule proved as brutal as it looked with Illinois not winning a single game away from Champaign, but there were also some disastrous performances inside Memorial Stadium as well in games that at this time a year ago looked winnable on paper.

While 2013 doesn't appear it'll be that much better, there's a little reason for optimism that the Fighting Illini will at least be better than 2-10 in 2013. I have to admit there are times where I hear Beckman speak and immediately find myself reminded of former Minnesota coach Tim Brewster, who coincidentally was a tight end for Illinois back in the 1980s. But there's one major difference – Beckman has at least shown in the past he can win as a Division-I coach. The talk of him being on the hot seat is unwarranted right now because it isn't as though his predecessor at Illinois left him much to work with and it should be pointed out that he has since hired a new offensive coordinator in former Western Michigan head coach Bill Cubit.

One thing Beckman stressed at Big Ten Media Days last month is that he has seniors who are committed as leaders on this team, and it starts with Fighting Illini quarterback Nathan

Scheelhaase. Illinois has depth at this position, but the starting job is Scheelhaase's to lose. That he only threw four touchdown passes in 10 games last season has to be a major concern, but unlike his back-up Reilly O'Toole, Scheelhaase is a threat on the ground. He had the second-most carries and was third in rushing yards for Illinois in 2012 and his four rushing TDs were a team-high.

But the best offensive player right now is a junior in running back Donovan Young. As a sophomore, he led Illinois in rushing with 571 yards on the ground and he also led the team with 38 receptions. This illustrates the issues Illinois had on offense last year because his production as a back diminished as the season wore on and quite honestly, a running back shouldn't be your receptions leader. The good news for the Fighting Illini here is that not only does Young return, but so does sophomore running back Josh Ferguson, who was second in rushing.

The receiving corps will be led by a pair of senior wideouts in Ryan Lankford and Spencer Harris. Lankford is the better of the two as he led Illinois with 469 receiving yards and five touchdown catches. Harris had 21 catches for 252 yards and two touchdowns. Assuming both at the very least put up similar numbers to last season, the Fighting Illini are still going to need some younger receivers to elevate their game in 2013 in order for the passing game to not remain in a stagnant funk.

Perhaps the biggest question mark though with Illinois' offense is up front. While three members of last season's offensive line return, the two that are gone were the Fighting Illini's best and they also happened to play the two most important positions on the line – left tackle and center. Junior Simon Cvijanovic spent most of last season at right tackle and makes the switch over to the left side. Junior Michael Heitz started 11 games at left guard last season while sophomore Ted Karras – great nephew of Iowa legend Alex Karras – was the only member of the O-Line to start all 12 games in

2012.

Defensively, the front four is a major concern as Illinois loses three starters from last year, including Akeem Spence and Michael Buchanan. The one returnee along the D-Line is senior Tim Kynard, who only started six of the 11 games he appeared in and compiled just 18 tackles last season. Junior Houston Bates makes the switch this year from linebacker to the D-End spot opposite Kynard. How Bates performs moving closer to the line of scrimmage will be intriguing to watch.

The linebacking corps is undoubtedly the Fighting Illini defense's strength entering 2013. Sophomore middle linebacker Mason Monheim returns after leading Illinois with 86 tackles in 2012. Also returning is another senior Beckman will rely heavily on this year in linebacker Jonathan Brown, who had an enormous season in 2011 before being hampered with injuries last year and having a huge drop-off statistically, going from 108 tackles two years ago to just 59 tackles last season.

Like the defensive line, Illinois' secondary only returns one starter in strong safety Earnest Thomas, who had 69 tackles in 2012. A name to likely emerge at one of the corner spots is sophomore Eaton Spence, who had 16 tackles as a freshman and actually started games last year against Wisconsin and Michigan. Beyond that, this is a very young group that opposing offenses will look to test early on.

Justin DuVernois returns as the Fighting Illini's punter after booming 73 punts in 2012 for a net average of 41.9 yards, good for fourth in the Big Ten among punters, while Taylor Zalewski will handle place-kicking duties after going 4-of-7 on field goal tries last season. Illinois has sophomore defensive back V'Angelo Bentley listed as its top return man for 2013 after Ferguson led the Fighting Illini with 19 kickoff returns.

Now looking at the schedule, Illinois has a pair of challenging non-conference games at home against Cincinnati

and the following week at Soldier Field in Chicago against a Pac-12 up-and-comer in Washington. These two games will give a strong indication as to how much better Illinois will be this fall because once again, the Big Ten slate is tough. The month of October features a challenging trifecta of playing at Nebraska, followed by consecutive home games against Wisconsin in prime time and then against Michigan State. The month of November features consecutive road games at Penn State and Indiana, as well as home games against Ohio State and Northwestern, both of whom clobbered the Fighting Illini last season.

I don't foresee Illinois going to a bowl game simply because the schedule's tough and there are certain areas that just seem to be too much of an unknown. I do expect the Fighting Illini though to perform better in Beckman's second season and it shouldn't surprise if they make some of these teams they play late in the season sweat a little more than they'd like.

AUDIO:

Tim Beckman, Illinois head coach – <http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Tim-Beckman-2013-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>

Tim Kynard, Illinois defensive end – <http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Tim-Kynard-2013-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>