

2013 Big Ten football previews: Wisconsin (premium)

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After discussing [Penn State](#), [Illinois](#), [Purdue](#) and [Indiana](#), the next Big Ten team I will spend time focusing on is last year's Big Ten Championship Game winner, the Wisconsin Badgers. Iowa will play Wisconsin on Nov. 2 at Kinnick Stadium.

There honestly might not be a more fascinating Big Ten team entering this upcoming 2013 season than Wisconsin. On one hand, the Badgers went through a coaching overhaul as Bret Bielema bolted for Arkansas and Wisconsin ended up replacing him with former Utah State head coach Gary Andersen. But on the other hand, this is also a program coming off three straight Rose Bowl appearances. Even though the Badgers finished third in the Leaders Division last season, they went to the Big Ten Championship Game because both Ohio State and Penn State were ineligible for postseason play and proceeded to crush Nebraska 70-31 that evening in Indianapolis.

Do I think Wisconsin makes it back to Lucas Oil Stadium for a chance to three-peat its title game crown? No, I don't. But there are definitely some things about this team that lead me to believe it can be a contender in Andersen's first season.

The offense is now led by first-year offensive coordinator Andy Ludwig, who joined Andersen's staff after being an assistant at San Diego State. While the coaching is different, many of the faces on this side of the football remain familiar.

Right now, the Badgers have a three-way competition taking place at quarterback between sophomore Joel Stave, sixth-year

senior Curt Phillips, and junior college transfer Tanner McEvoy, who will be a redshirt sophomore. Stave took over at quarterback in late September for Danny O'Brien (who has since transferred) and suffered a season-ending injury just as he was beginning to solidify himself as Wisconsin's signal-caller. Phillips then came in and led the Badger offense during the season's final stretch, including the clobbering of Nebraska in the Big Ten Championship Game.

My inkling here is Stave emerges as the starter for Wisconsin when it opens its season, mainly because he did nothing to warrant losing the starting job prior to getting injured and Andersen could build the offense around Stave's strengths not just this season, but for the next two seasons as well.

Now the backfield is where the biggest loss from last year's squad lies, as Montee Ball has moved on and is now playing for the Denver Broncos. However, the Badgers do return two other running backs that were vital to their success in 2012. James White rushed for 806 yards and 12 touchdowns on 125 carries last season and enters his senior season as Wisconsin's top back. But right behind him is sophomore Melvin Gordon, who had 62 carries for 621 yards and three scores and became more involved in the offense late last year. Regardless of who the Badgers have back there, they can't really go wrong either way.

The receiving corps might actually be the strength of Wisconsin's offense in 2013 though. One of the Big Ten's top wideouts returns in senior Jared Abbrederis and the Badgers also bring back senior tight end Jacob Pedersen, who was first-team all-Big Ten in 2012 and earned the league's honor as its best tight end, period. Abbrederis led Wisconsin with 837 yards receiving on 49 catches and hauled in five touchdowns in 2012. Meanwhile, Pedersen had 27 catches for 355 yards receiving and four scores. Two other names to watch here in 2013 will be sophomore receiver Jordan Frederick and senior tight end Brian Wozniak.

Wisconsin brings back three offensive linemen from last season, but the two departures were its two best linemen in 2012. Gone are consensus first-team all-Big Ten tackle Ricky Wagner and center Travis Frederick, who was a first round pick of the Dallas Cowboys. Senior Ryan Groy started 12 games at left guard last season, but moves over to left tackle to replace Wagner. Juniors Kyle Costigan and Rob Havenstein return to the right side of the line at guard and tackle, respectively. Right now, junior Dallas Lewallen is listed at left guard and redshirt freshman Dan Voltz takes over at center. As one might also imagine, every one of these linemen weighs over 300 pounds each.

Defensively, Dave Aranda takes over at defensive coordinator after following Andersen over to Wisconsin from Utah State, where he served the same role last season. The biggest adjustment here for the Badgers will be with transitioning to a 3-4 defense under Aranda.

The transition might be coming at a decent time though because all three of the projected starters along the defensive line are seniors and two of them – end Ethan Hemer and nose tackle Beau Allen – started all 14 of Wisconsin's games in 2012. The end opposite Hemer is Pat Muldoon, who started six of the 11 games he appeared in.

As for the linebacking corps, the bad news here is Mike Taylor and his 123 tackles from last year (second-most of any Big Ten defensive player) are gone. The good news though is Chris Borland returns for his senior season following a year where he compiled 104 tackles for the Badgers. Also returning in 2013 is senior Ethan Armstrong, who started all 14 games last year and like Borland will be inside. One of the likely names to watch on the outside will be senior Brendan Kelly, who had 28 tackles and led the Badgers with five sacks in 2012.

The secondary is where the cause for concern lies as the only returning starter from last year is senior free safety Dezman

Southward, who comes off a season where he was fourth on the Badgers in tackles with 69 of them. This is where younger players will have to emerge for Wisconsin if it's going to continue being the marquee program it has been in the Big Ten these past few seasons.

Sophomore Drew Meyer will handle the punting duties again, while junior Kyle French currently has the edge as the Badgers' placekicker for 2013. Abbrederis will most likely be used on punt returns again, while Gordon could be involved on kickoff return along with junior Kenzel Doe, who split time with Abbrederis on punt returns and was among Wisconsin's kick returners last season.

Looking at the Badgers' schedule and the one non-conference game that jumps out is Sept. 14 at Arizona State, a prime time game on the road against a team who will be among those contending for the Pac-12 South crown in 2013. Interestingly, Wisconsin also has a non-conference game against BYU at Camp Randall Stadium in November and as a result, opens Big Ten play at home against Purdue one week earlier than anyone else. In fact, Wisconsin will be one of just five Big Ten teams playing league games in September and the only one of those five to have played two before the calendar turns to October.

The Badgers also have to play at Ohio State on Sept. 28, another prime time game on the road. Simply put, a lot will be revealed about Wisconsin by this point in the season. Wisconsin's schedule also features home games against Northwestern and Penn State and road trips against conference rivals Iowa and Minnesota.

Again, I believe the streak of Big Ten titles ends this year, but I would've felt that way even if Bielema hadn't left to coach Arkansas, so it's not an indictment of Andersen or his coaching. To me, Wisconsin is a solid team that will face a couple of huge obstacles in 2013. That being said, this is certainly a team that can win anywhere from 7-9 games this

season.

AUDIO:

Gary Andersen, Wisconsin head coach – <http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Gary-Andersen-2013-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>

Jared Abbrederis, Wisconsin wide receiver – <http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Jared-Abbrederis-2013-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>