

2013 Big Ten football previews: Ohio State (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

After examining [Penn State](#), [Illinois](#), [Purdue](#), [Indiana](#) and [Wisconsin](#), we now take time to discuss the upcoming 2013 season for the Ohio State Buckeyes, who went a perfect 12-0 last season and won the Leaders Division despite having a postseason ban. Iowa visits Ohio Stadium (a.k.a. “The Horseshoe”) in Columbus, Ohio, on Oct. 19.

I’m going to keep this real simple – Ohio State is clearly the best team in the Big Ten entering 2013 and it shouldn’t surprise anyone if the Buckeyes not only win the conference this season, but make a trip to the BCS National Championship Game being played on Jan. 6 in Pasadena, Calif.

Last season ended up being the absolute best case scenario for Ohio State considering its circumstances. Had there not been a postseason ban in place, the Buckeyes would’ve been the team facing Notre Dame last January instead of Alabama, who ended up winning a second straight national title in part because of Ohio State athletics director Gene Smith underestimating the type of punishment that would be handed down by the NCAA. The turning point for the Buckeyes came in their Big Ten opener at Michigan State, a game they won 17-16. From there, Ohio State won five straight to reach 10-0 entering its final two games, which ended up being an overtime victory at Wisconsin and a win at home over arch-rival Michigan to cap a perfect season in Urban Meyer’s first year in charge.

Meyer has already made an enormous impact not just on Ohio

State, but on the entire Big Ten, and the Buckeyes are poised to be even more dominant this year. One of the biggest reasons why is the return of junior quarterback Braxton Miller, who was named the Big Ten's top QB and Offensive Player of the Year in 2012. Miller is coming off a sophomore year where he accounted for 28 Ohio State touchdowns (15 through the air, 13 on the ground). He was the Buckeyes' leading rusher with 1,271 yards on 227 carries, good for fourth in the entire Big Ten and second among Big Ten signal-callers. Ohio State might not want him being its leading rusher again in 2013, but being that dual threat is what makes Miller as good as he is.

Now it gets interesting in the backfield because senior running back Carlos Hyde is currently serving a minimum three-game suspension that could end up being longer. Hyde rushed for 970 yards and a team-high 16 touchdowns last season. If and when he returns to the field, he's going to end up being as important to the Buckeye offense as Miller. In the meantime, senior Jordan Hall is the most experienced back currently eligible, but it wouldn't surprise me to see Ohio State go "running back by committee" until Hyde returns (assuming he does).

Ohio State lost only two starters from last year's offense, with one of those guys being wideout Jake Stoneburner. His absence might not be as enormous as one would expect though because both of the Buckeyes' top two wideouts (statistically speaking) in 2012 are back. Senior wide receiver Corey Brown had 60 catches for 669 yards receiving (both of which were team-highs) and three touchdowns, while junior Devin Smith emerged as a deep threat, hauling in 30 receptions for 618 yards and a team-high six TDs. Barring injuries, I would expect similar production from Brown in 2013 and even more from Smith. Ohio State also has a big-time freshman receiver that has caught the coaching staff's attention during fall camp in Dontre Wilson.

Part of the Buckeyes' success in 2012 also stemmed from having

the same five starters along the offensive line for every single game. Four of the five are back this season and the left side of the line is going to be this group's strength with seniors Jack Mewhort and Andrew Norwell returning at tackle and guard, respectively. Center Corey Linsley and right guard Marcus Hall also both return for their senior seasons. Sophomore Taylor Decker is currently atop Ohio State's depth chart at right tackle, replacing Reid Fragel. This is probably the best O-line in the Big Ten and arguably one of the nation's best.

The defensive side of the ball has a bit more mystery to it. While 80 percent of the offensive line is back, the front four conversely lost all four starters from a year ago, including Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year John Simon. Junior defensive tackle Michael Bennett started the Buckeyes' game at Penn State last season, while the other three likely starters this fall are all true sophomores. Adolphus Washington and Noah Spence will be the names to watch at the two end positions, while Tommy Schutt will likely start inside along with Bennett. It's hard to say this group is a weakness, but right now, it's definitely a question mark.

Ohio State only returns one linebacker, but he might very well be the best defensive player the Buckeyes have this season in junior Ryan Shazier. Because Shazier – who led Ohio State with 115 tackles and was second to Simon with five sacks in 2012 – is back, I don't expect too much of a drop-off here from these guys. Junior Curtis Grant started the Buckeyes' first three games last season and is listed as the starter at middle linebacker, while Joshua Perry's the likely candidate to fill the other outside spot opposite Shazier.

The good news regarding Ohio State's secondary is that it returns the Buckeyes' second, third, and fourth-leading tacklers from a year ago and both safeties – Christian Bryant (strong) and C.J. Barnett (free) – are seniors. However, it remains to be seen whether junior cornerback Bradley Roby will

be with the team when the season begins due to legal trouble stemming from an arrest last month. This is a trio that accounted for combined totals of 190 tackles, 35 pass break ups and five interceptions in 2012. Junior Doran Grant will likely take over at corner opposite Roby, replacing the Buckeyes' interceptions leader in Travis Howard.

Senior placekicker Drew Basil will once again handle field goal and PAT duties, and will apparently also assume the role of Ohio State's punter in 2013, replacing Ben Buchanan. The return game will likely feature junior running back Rod Smith and the two wideouts – Brown and Devin Smith. Brown returned a pair of punts for touchdowns last season in games against Nebraska and Wisconsin.

Even with a road trip to Cal, who gave Ohio State a scare at the Horseshoe last season, the Buckeyes should get through their non-conference slate undefeated and be at 4-0 when they open Big Ten play at home against Wisconsin on Sept. 28. If Ohio State doesn't run the table in 2013, there are two games that I could see being slip-ups and both of them are on the road. One is Oct. 5 at Northwestern, and the other (of course) is Nov. 30 at Michigan.

I have a hard time seeing the Buckeyes losing any games at home, so if they're able to get out of both Evanston and Ann Arbor with wins, Ohio State will be in Indianapolis for the Big Ten title game looking at a potential berth in the BCS title game. Whether it's on Jan. 1 or Jan. 6 (and I really feel it will be the latter), I totally expect the Buckeyes' season to end in Pasadena and it would be quite the surprise if it doesn't after all the momentum Ohio State has gained leading up to this season.

AUDIO:

Urban Meyer, Ohio State head coach –
<http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Urban-Meyer>

[-2013-B1G-Media-Days.mp3](#)

Braxton Miller, Ohio State quarterback
– <http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Braxton-Miller-2013-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>