

2013 Big Ten football previews: Northwestern (premium)

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Thus far in our Big Ten season preview series, we have discussed [Penn State](#), [Illinois](#), [Purdue](#), [Indiana](#), [No. 23 Wisconsin](#), [No. 2 Ohio State](#), [Minnesota](#) and [Michigan State](#). We now turn our attention to the Northwestern Wildcats, who enter the 2013 ranked 22nd nationally. Iowa will play Northwestern on Oct. 26 at Kinnick Stadium.

Before I dive too deep into analyzing Northwestern here, I have to acknowledge that this is the one team I badly whiffed on when doing these previews a year ago. At this time last August, I wasn't entirely sold on the Wildcats even being a bowl team because they lost a ton of talent from two years ago. They were not only better in 2012, but exponentially better. Northwestern won 10 games last season – including its first bowl victory in 64 years – and held double-digit leads in the fourth quarters all three of its losses. That's how close this team was to historic.

This season, the Wildcats are ranked in the preseason top 25 and deservedly so. There's a lot of momentum with this Northwestern program right now and while 2013 is going to present more challenges (at least on paper), I really believe the Wildcats are equipped to handle most of them.

Northwestern has a very unique quarterback situation because it uses both Kain Colter and Trevor Siemian regularly at the position. Siemian threw for more yards last season, but Colter completed over two-thirds of his pass attempts in 2012 and

also threw two more touchdowns (8) than Siemian. As far as who starts, Colter's the one who probably will (and in my opinion should) start because he's more of a threat running the ball than Siemian is, as evident by his 12 touchdowns on the ground. But barring injuries, I imagine Pat Fitzgerald will continue using both as frequently as he did a year ago.

Last season, the Wildcats had the Big Ten's third-highest scoring offense and a huge reason why was the play of running back Venric Mark, who returns for his senior year this fall. In a league that had plenty of good backs, Mark and his burst through almost any open lane he saw really stood out. Mark led Northwestern in rushing with 1,366 yards on 226 carries and tied Colter with 12 touchdowns on the ground. Right now, Mark has to be considered the conference's top running back and it wouldn't shock me if he led the Big Ten in rushing this season.

Also returning in 2013 for the Wildcats are four of their top five leading receivers from a year ago. Christian Jones led Northwestern last season with 35 catches and 412 receiving yards. Tony Jones (no relation) caught 29 passes for 335 yards and led the Wildcats with four touchdown catches. Both juniors averaged nearly 12 yards per reception. Add in senior wideout Rashad Lawrence and sophomore superback Dan Vitale both returning and Northwestern brings back a very experienced group of playmakers.

If there's one question with this offense though, it's up front and it's a huge question mark. After receiving plenty of continuity up front in 2012, the Wildcats only return two starters – junior center Brandon Vitabile and junior Jack Konopka, who started every game last season at right tackle and has now moved over to left tackle to replace Patrick Ward. Junior Paul Jorgensen is the likely candidate to take over at right tackle, while the two guard spots could end up being filled by underclassmen. The development of this group will be essential if this team's going to seriously contend in the

Legends Division this season.

As for the defensive line, the good news for Northwestern is senior defensive end Tyler Scott returning after a junior year where he led the Big Ten with nine sacks while also recording 42 tackles. This group also brings back junior Sean McEvilly inside at one of the tackle spots. There's depth along the Wildcat front four, but someone will need to emerge here, especially with opposing offenses being more keyed in now on Scott.

Like most defenses, the heart and soul of them is typically in the linebacking corps and that certainly holds true here with Northwestern. Senior middle linebacker Damien Proby led the Wildcats with 112 tackles in 2012 and junior outside 'backer Chi Chi Ariguzo finished third with 91 tackles and also recorded three sacks and two interceptions. Junior Collin Ellis is the likely candidate to fill the other outside spot left by David Nwabuisi.

In the secondary, there's a void left by free safety. Otherwise, Northwestern brings back strong safety Ibraheim Campbell and corners Nick VanHoose and Daniel Jones in 2013. Campbell had 89 tackles last season, along with a team-high 12 pass break ups. VanHoose and Jones both had 33 tackles a year ago and VanHoose also compiled seven pass break ups and a team-high three interceptions for the Wildcats as a redshirt freshman. None of these three are seniors, either, so there's a chance this group continues to develop into a huge strength for a Northwestern defense that led the Big Ten in turnover margin last year.

Senior Brandon Williams averaged 39.9 yards per punt in 2012 and returns to handle the Wildcats' punting duties again this fall. Northwestern also brings back one of the conference's best kickers in senior Jeff Budzien, who made all of his PAT tries last season and led the Big Ten with a 95 percent accuracy rate on field goal attempts (he went 19-of-20). Oh,

and the return game will once again feature Mark, who returned punts for touchdowns in games against Syracuse and Penn State, the first punt return touchdowns by the Wildcats since Fitzgerald took over as head coach in 2006.

Once again, Northwestern is pretty bold with its non-conference scheduling. After playing three non-conference games against BCS opponents last season (four if you want to include the Gator Bowl victory over Mississippi State), the Wildcats open this season with a trip to California on Aug. 31, followed by their home opener against Syracuse on Sept. 7, a team Northwestern beat 42-41 in its 2012 opener.

Now regarding the Wildcats' Big Ten slate, this is the one trepidation that keeps me from picking Northwestern to win the Legends Division (well, that and the inexperience along the O-line, I suppose). The Wildcats belong right there in the conversation with No. 17 Michigan, No. 18 Nebraska and Michigan State. In fact, Northwestern doesn't play any of these three teams until November and only one of those games is away from Ryan Field (Nov. 2 at Nebraska).

But here's the difference in the scheduling: Of those four teams, the Wildcats are the only one who has to play BOTH No. 2 Ohio State and No. 23 Wisconsin in 2013. Not only that, but those also happen to be the first two Big Ten games they play. As it pertains to that Oct. 5 contest against the Buckeyes, that might not be a bigger regular season game Northwestern has ever played (at least under Fitzgerald) at Ryan Field or will play there anytime soon.

It's Homecoming. It's in prime time and given the rest of the college football schedule that week, there's a good chance of "College GameDay" being in Evanston that weekend (especially if Northwestern gets through its non-conference slate unbeaten). The Wildcats have two weeks to prepare while Ohio State will be coming off another high-stakes game the week before against Wisconsin. All this, combined with all the

momentum from winning 10 games and winning the Gator Bowl last year that carried Northwestern through this offseason, and this particular game is make-or-break.

If the Wildcats beat the Buckeyes, they instantly become the favorite to win the Legends Division in 2013 and it could be huge for Fitzgerald and his program going into a future where Northwestern will be in the West Division when the Big Ten realigns in 2014. If the Wildcats don't win, they're already behind the 8-ball in their division and still have road trips to Wisconsin and Iowa before even getting to that daunting slate of games in November against the teams they'll most likely be competing against.

If you want to call it a "window of opportunity" here for Northwestern, it's a window that's currently open but could immediately shut if the Wildcats take a step back in 2013.

AUDIO:

Northwestern head coach Pat Fitzgerald – <http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Pat-Fitzgerald-2013-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>

Northwestern running back Venric Mark – <http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Venric-Mark-2013-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>