

# 2013 Big Ten football previews: Michigan (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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We've written about [Penn State](#), [Illinois](#), [Purdue](#), [Indiana](#), [No. 23 Wisconsin](#), [No. 2 Ohio State](#), [Minnesota](#), [Michigan State](#) and [No. 22 Northwestern](#). Now we set our sights on the Michigan Wolverines, who enter the 2013 season ranked 17th nationally. Iowa will play Michigan on Nov. 23 at Kinnick Stadium.

I previously mentioned whiffing on my Northwestern prediction last season. Conversely, the one team I was as close to "spot on" with predicting in the Big Ten as possible in 2012 was Michigan. Yes, the Wolverines didn't win the Legends Division like I thought they would or play in the Rose Bowl like I thought, but they did go 8-4 and the four losses came in the four games I figured they'd lose last year. They also lost the Outback Bowl to South Carolina in a game the Gamecocks were favored to win.

Now in 2013, Michigan is a team being considered by many as the favorite to win the Legends Division. Part of it I feel is sentimental because this year marks the last possible opportunity for the Wolverines to meet Ohio State for the Big Ten title before they share the same division again in 2014. While I think Michigan is good and it wouldn't surprise me if it did win the Legends Division, I'm not entirely certain of this.

Quarterback is intriguing because I actually believe the Wolverines are better here now. Not to take anything away from Denard Robinson because he was an exciting player to watch, but I feel junior Devin Gardner is more of a fit in offensive coordinator Al Borges' system. Before, Brady Hoke in his

coaching staff had to improvise around Robinson. Now with Gardner taking snaps and having a better arm, Hoke and Borges will probably be able to run more of the kind of offense they've been wanting to run at Michigan.

When I look at running back, it looks clearer than one might be led to believe. If junior Fitzgerald Toussaint is back on the field, he's the Wolverines' top back, period. He suffered a nasty leg injury against Iowa last season, but still managed to rush for 514 yards and five touchdowns while getting 130 carries. Going back to the point about style of offense, my hunch is Toussaint's not only the No. 1 back, but that his production is going to increase here in 2013 now that Michigan isn't going to bank on Robinson racking up a ton of yards on the ground.

In the receiving corps, the Wolverines do bring back their leading receiver from last year in senior Jeremy Gallon. As a junior, he finished with 49 catches for 829 yards receiving and four touchdowns. Also returning is senior wideout Drew Dileo. One name to watch here is sophomore Amara Darboh, who played at West Des Moines Valley High School in Iowa and now sits atop the depth chart with these two seniors, expected to fill a void left by Roy Roundtree. Michigan also has a really solid tight end in sophomore Devin Funchess, who hauled in 15 catches for 234 yards receiving and recorded a team-high five touchdowns in 2012.

Now up front, there's great news in left tackle Taylor Lewan deciding to return for his senior season. For my money, he's not just the best offensive lineman in the Big Ten, but perhaps the best offensive lineman in the entire country. Had he bolted early for the NFL, Lewan would've easily been a top 5 pick. With him and fellow senior right tackle Michael Schofield both back in 2013, the Wolverines are solid on the outside.

Here's the "but" when talking about the offensive line though

– the entire inside of it will be new. Michigan lost three starters from last season that started every game and is replacing them with two redshirt freshmen at both guard positions and sophomore Jack Miller in the center spot. This is a group that could get better as the season progresses, especially with an anchor like Lewan on the outside. But it could be a struggle early on.

The defensive line returns one regular starter and two others who had some starting experience in 2012. The most experienced player is senior defensive tackle Quinton Washington, who started Michigan's last 10 games of the season and compiled 32 tackles and two sacks. Junior defensive end Frank Clark started four games a year ago (including the Outback Bowl against South Carolina) and senior defensive tackle Jibreel Black made a pair of starts.

While the linebacking corps might still be a strength for this Wolverine defense, it'll be without its top tackler Jake Ryan, who will be out the entire 2013 season with a torn ACL. Ryan had 88 tackles, including 11.5 for a loss of yards and led Michigan with 4.5 sacks. Desmond Morgan returns for his junior campaign after recording 81 tackles and is now the leader of this group.

In the secondary, gone is Jordan Kovacs, who was one of Michigan's best players during his collegiate career. However, this will still be a solid group in 2013, mainly because it'll have cornerback Blake Countess back after he suffered a season-ending injury in the Wolverines' opener against Alabama. Also returning is senior free safety Thomas Gordon and junior cornerback Raymon Taylor. Gordon tied Morgan with 81 tackles.

One of the conference's best punters returns on special teams in senior Will Hagerup, but he also finds himself in competition with Matt Wile, who started games in Hagerup's place while the latter served an early-season suspension.

Brendan Gibbons will once again handle the placekicking duties for the Wolverines and Gallon is back to return punts once again.

Looking at Michigan's schedule, it's kind of intriguing. Following its season opener against Central Michigan, the Wolverines play their annual rivalry game with Notre Dame at "The Big House" on Sept. 7, which will be one of those "national perception" sort of games for the entire Big Ten given the Fighting Irish going 3-0 against the Big Ten last season en route to playing in the national title game. Michigan also has to play at Connecticut before opening Big Ten play.

The Wolverines' Big Ten slate will be challenging. They do get to play "The Game" against No. 2 Ohio State at home. But it also features a road trip to Penn State in October and then come November, Michigan will be part of a four-team round-robin that'll likely decide the Legends Division. It starts with a trip to Michigan State, followed by a home game against No. 18 Nebraska and another road game at No. 22 Northwestern. How the Wolverines fare in these three games will decide whether or not the Wolverines reach Indianapolis on Dec. 7.

I like Hoke. I think this is a good Michigan team that to be completely honest, looks like it's a year away from being big-time. I just don't see the Wolverines winning the Legends Division unless the interior of their O-line is on the same page with their tackles and unless they get everything situated with their front seven on defense, because Ryan's injury is a huge blow.

#### **AUDIO:**

Michigan head coach Brady Hoke –  
<http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Brady-Hoke-2013-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>

Michigan quarterback Devin Gardner

- <http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Devin-Gardner-2013-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>