

2013 Big Ten football previews: Nebraska (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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We've discussed [Penn State](#), [Illinois](#), [Purdue](#), [Indiana](#), [No. 23 Wisconsin](#), [No. 2 Ohio State](#), [Minnesota](#), [Michigan State](#), [No. 22 Northwestern](#) and [No. 17 Michigan](#). Now our attention shifts to the No. 18 Nebraska Cornhuskers, who won the Legends Division last season. Iowa visits Memorial Stadium in Lincoln, Neb., on Nov. 29.

For as tumultuous as it appeared Nebraska's season was at times in 2012, the Cornhuskers managed to turn things around in mid-October and ended up posting a 7-1 conference mark to win the Legends Division outright. But the games Nebraska did lose were ugly, particularly on the defensive side of the football. In its four defeats, the team historically known for its "Blackshirts" defense surrendered a combined total of 214 points. Just in those four games. That includes giving up 70 points in losing the Big Ten Championship Game to Wisconsin.

But with all of that out of the way, I look at the Cornhuskers here in 2013 and see a team that looks like it could at the very least return to Lucas Oil Stadium this December and maybe find itself in the Rose Bowl regardless of that outcome.

Nebraska had, at least statistically speaking, the Big Ten's top offense in 2012 and it returns a lot of playmakers from that group this fall. It obviously starts with senior quarterback Taylor Martinez, who now seems to have Tim Beck's offense down pat after a junior campaign where he remarkably completed 62 percent of his passes for 2,871 yards and tossed 23 touchdowns. To put that in perspective, Martinez had that many TD passes for his entire career entering last season. Add

in that he also rushed for 1,019 yards and there's a chance Martinez could be leaving Nebraska as its most decorated quarterback in school history. Let that sink in.

While the Cornhusker backfield won't have Rex Burkhead back there anymore, it does bring back junior Ameer Abdullah, who led Nebraska in rushing last season with 1,137 yards rushing on 226 carries and eight touchdowns. Now that he's clearly the top back and Martinez has shown he can throw the ball effectively, I would expect Abdullah's workload to increase a little in 2013. Another name to watch as well is sophomore Imani Cross, a bigger back who rushed for seven touchdowns on 55 carries as a freshman.

Also looking to boost Nebraska's offense in 2013 is a very experienced receiving corps returning all three of its top wideouts. The leader of this group is junior Kenny Bell. As a sophomore, Bell led the Cornhuskers in just about every receiving category with 50 catches, 863 yards receiving and eight touchdowns. Senior Quincy Enunwa and junior Jamal Turner make up the rest of the unit's core, combining for 74 catches, 887 yards and four scores between the two. Senior Jake Long is expected to fill the void left at tight end by the outgoing Ben Cotton.

The offensive line is fairly experienced, featuring three seniors who all contributed heavily in 2012. Brent Qvale returns at left tackle, along with Jeremiah Sirles at right tackle and Spencer Long at right guard. Sirles and Long started every game and Qvale every game except the one against Northwestern. Senior Cole Pensick, who took over at center for both the Big Ten Championship Game against Wisconsin and the Capital One Bowl against Georgia, also returns and is listed atop the Cornhuskers' depth chart.

While Nebraska's offense looks to be strong, the defense (and more specifically, the front seven) is one that is very young and inexperienced, even though head coach Bo Pelini believes

there's serious potential. The front seven returns one starter – senior defensive end Jason Ankrah. That's it.

Ankrah had 26 tackles and two sacks while starting nine games last season and is now one of the guys being heavily looked up this year. Joining him along the defensive line is another senior in Thad Randle and then a pair of redshirt freshmen – Vincent Valentine and Greg McMullen. Valentine is expected to start alongside Randle at defensive tackle, while McMullen will take over at the end spot opposite Ankrah. This is a front four that lost a couple of marquee guys in Cameron Meredith and Blake Steinkuhler, who between the two of them had 100 tackles and 7.5 sacks.

Then there's the linebacking corps losing all three of Will Compton, Sean Fisher and Alonzo Whaley. This trio only started five games together as Nebraska opened the majority of its games last season in nickel, but the Cornhuskers won four of those five games. Junior Zaire Anderson got to start against Arkansas State and sophomore David Santos got to start against Michigan. Santos had 24 tackles as a freshman and now that he's anchoring the middle of this group, he'll be someone Nebraska will need to perform big. Redshirt freshman Jared Afalava is also likely to start this season.

The secondary is by far the most experienced group of players returning to the "Blackshirts." Not just because it features three guys who started the bulk of the Cornhuskers' games back there last season, but because some of the younger players saw significant action with the amount of nickel and dime that was played. Nebraska brings back both of its corners in seniors Ciente Evans and Andrew Green. Evans had 56 tackles and led the Cornhuskers with eight pass break ups, while Green had 50 tackles. Nebraska also brings back Stanley Jean-Baptiste, who's the only current DB who had more than one interception a year ago.

On special teams, the return game will be fine with both

Abdullah and Bell. But the Cornhuskers also had the luxury of one of the league's top kickers in Brett Maher, who handled both punting and placekicking, and he's no longer there. Nebraska will need to have both a punter and a kicker established and the players plugged into those spots have enormous shoes to fill.

Looking at the schedule, the key game is Sept. 14 against UCLA, a game the Cornhuskers get at home after losing to the Bruins in Pasadena last year. If Nebraska's able to avenge that loss, there's a very real chance it enters its Nov. 2 home date with Northwestern at 7-0. I would be cautious of the game one week earlier at Minnesota because it's the pure definition of a "trap game" with the Cornhuskers coming off a bye and playing the Golden Gophers before entering their November gauntlet.

Nebraska's three main competitors in the Legends Division are Northwestern, Michigan and Michigan State, with the Wolverines being the only team of these three the Cornhuskers play away from Lincoln. There's also a tough road game at Penn State on Nov. 23, but Nebraska should be favored in that game assuming its season doesn't become a complete disaster.

The Legends Division is nearly a complete toss-up this season, but if I had to pick a team to come out of that division to meet Ohio State for the Big Ten title, it would be the Cornhuskers. And even if Nebraska doesn't win that game, the possibility of going to the Rose Bowl might still be there if Ohio State finds itself in the BCS National Championship Game like many expect.

If Nebraska's defense manages to meet Pelini's expectations, it shouldn't be entering that November stretch as an enormous question mark still like it currently is and if that does happen, watch out.

AUDIO:

Nebraska head coach Bo Pelini –
<http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Bo-Pelini-2013-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>

Nebraska quarterback Taylor Martinez –
<http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Taylor-Martinez-2013-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>