

2013-14 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Illinois (premium)

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With the 2013-14 men's college basketball season kicking off Nov. 8, *HawkeyeDrive.com* will give you rundowns this week on all 12 Big Ten teams. Here, we'll showcase Illinois. The Fighting Illini will play Iowa twice this season – Feb. 1 at the State Farm Center in Champaign, Ill., and either March 8 or 9 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

John Groce's first season at the helm in Champaign proved to be an intriguing one. Illinois got off to an insane start to its season, winning the Maui Invitational and beating an eventual No. 1 seed in Gonzaga on the road. The Fighting Illini proved they were capable during the non-conference portion of their season and this ultimately secured them a spot in the NCAA tournament, where they beat Colorado before getting knocked out in the third round by a No. 2 seed in Miami (Fla.). Big Ten play was more a struggle, finishing eighth in the conference standings with an 8-10 mark. But it featured a pair of home victories over the likes of Ohio State (the Big Ten tournament champion) and Indiana (the Big Ten regular season champion).

Now as Illinois enters Year Two of the Groce era, there's a changing of the guard taking place. Gone are the likes of Brandon Paul and D.J. Richardson, who were two of the Fighting Illini's best players a season ago. They were Illinois' top two leading scorers and were second and fourth respectively on the team in rebounding last year. Richardson was also the lone Illinois player to start every game in 2012-13, while Paul

started all but one contest.

In terms of experienced players the Fighting Illini will have to lean on this year, the two names immediately coming to mind are a pair of juniors in guard Tracy Abrams and center Nnanna Ekwu. Abrams is the team's top returning leading scorer after averaging 10.6 points per game last season. He also led Illinois in both assists (121) and steals (50). Ekwu was the Fighting Illini's leading rebounder a year ago averaging 4.9 boards per game and also had a team-high 49 blocked shots.

Another returning player who will play a greater role in 2013-14 is senior guard Joseph Bertrand. As a junior, he started five games and averaged 7.3 points per game. With Paul and Richardson no longer around, Bertrand will need to become a go-to scorer Illinois can rely on when opposing backcourts are keying on Abrams.

Illinois has a trio of transfers who have to sit out this season. But one of its incoming transfers from last year is now eligible for the next two seasons in guard Rayvonte Rice, who came from Drake. How much of a role Rice plays remains to be seen, but Groce described him as someone who put in the time and effort throughout the entire offseason. Rice started all but two games during his two seasons at Drake and averaged double figures scoring as both a freshman and sophomore for the Bulldogs.

As for incoming freshmen, there's a duo of guards from Chicago's Simeon High School coming in that highlight this group – Kendrick Nunn and Jaylon Tate. Nunn was the higher-rated prospect of the two, averaging 14.7 points and 7.3 rebounds per game as a high-school senior.

Looking at Illinois' schedule, the non-conference portion is slightly favorable and the Fighting Illini will need to take advantage of this, especially given the number of new faces Groce will have to turn to in 2013-14. Four games look to

present the biggest obstacles for Illinois – a home game against Valparaiso, a trip to UNLV right before Thanksgiving, a trip to Portland, Ore., to face No. 19 Oregon and the annual “Braggin’ Rights” showdown in St. Louis against Missouri.

As for the conference slate, there’s a 5-game stretch between Jan. 18-Feb. 4 that will be key. Illinois plays No. 2 Michigan State at home, followed by consecutive trips to No. 11 Ohio State and Indiana, followed by consecutive home games against Iowa and No. 20 Wisconsin. If the Fighting Illini can win at least two of those five games, their chances of returning to the NCAA Tournament look much better. One thing that also helps is having No. 7 Michigan as a single-play and that game being at State Farm Center.

Illinois has the look of a team that might be kind of the opposite of what it was a year ago, one that starts slow with all the roster turnover that took place this offseason, but gets better as the season progresses and the players have become accustomed to playing together. This could bode well come Big Ten play for the Fighting Illini, who either return to the tourney or make a deep NIT run like Iowa did. It’s an “Only time will tell” situation in Champaign.