

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

By Brendan Stiles

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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 Wisconsin. The Badgers enter this season ranked 20th nationally and will play Iowa twice this season – Jan. 5 at the Kohl Center in Madison, Wis., and Feb. 22 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

For as low as expectations were in Madison last season, Wisconsin continued a remarkable string of consistency under head coach Bo Ryan in 2012-13. Yes, the Badgers were immediately bounced from the NCAA Tournament by Ole Miss. But before that, Wisconsin managed to finish fourth in the conference, keeping its streak of finishing fourth or higher every season under Ryan intact. Then the Badgers proceeded to pick up wins in the Big Ten Tournament over eventual national runner-up and Indiana, who won the regular season crown outright.

Looking at this year's version of Wisconsin, the Badgers have one glaring area of concern with their front-court, which is now without three of Wisconsin's top four leading rebounders from 2012-13. Ryan Evans averaged 7.3 rebounds per game and Jared Berggren averaged 6.9 boards per contest. Berggren was also the Badgers' second leading scorer after averaging 11 points per game. Mike Bruesewitz averaged 6.4 points and 5.3 rebounds per contest.

The one experienced player returning to Wisconsin's front-

court in 2013-14 is 6-11 junior Frank Kaminsky, who started two of the 32 games he appeared in last season. The good news for the Badgers is they can get by with playing a small lineup and him being the center, but they're going to need plenty of production from Kaminsky, more than the 4.2 points and 1.8 rebounds he averaged as a sophomore.

Now the reason why Wisconsin can get away with a small line-up most of the time is because the Badgers have as potent a backcourt as any team in the conference. Senior guard Ben Brust returns after being the team's top leading scorer last season averaging 11.1 points per game. Brust is as complete a guard as Wisconsin has, as he's also its top returning rebounder and was second to returning guard Traevon Jackson in both assists and steals.

Jackson started 29 games as a sophomore and led the Badgers with 99 assists and 35 steals. He and Josh Gasser (who was slated to be Wisconsin's point guard last season, but missed all of 2012-13 after injuring his knee before the season began) both return for their junior campaigns.

Then there's sophomore wing player Sam Dekker, who should make an enormous jump in numbers between last season and this season. Dekker only started three of Wisconsin's 35 games as a freshman, but he averaged 22 minutes per game and led the Badgers in both overall shooting percentage and 3-point shooting percentage. If he's asked to play the 4-spot to complement the trio of guards (Brust, Jackson and Gasser), then expect Dekker to build off his 118 rebounds and evolve into a more complete player this season.

In terms of incoming freshmen, the two names to watch will be Nigel Hayes and Bronson Koenig. Hayes is a 6-7 wing player from Toledo, Ohio, that averaged 15.4 points and 8.7 rebounds per game as a high-school senior. Koenig was one of the top in-state recruits for Ryan and his staff after the 6-3 guard from LaCrosse, Wis., averaged 17 points and 4.4 assists his

senior year of high school.

Wisconsin has a challenging non-conference schedule in 2013-14. The Badgers open the season Nov. 8 with a contest against St. John's that will be played in Sioux Falls, S.D., then their home opener is Nov. 12 against No. 10 Florida. Wisconsin also drew Saint Louis (who has been to two straight NCAA tournaments) as its first opponent in the Cancun Challenge and that's just November. In December, the Badgers have a rematch with No. 24 Virginia in Charlottesville, Va., as part of the Big Ten/ACC Challenge, and also plays in-state rival Marquette (who is ranked 17th nationally preseason) at the Kohl Center.

As far as Big Ten play is concerned, Wisconsin caught an enormous break with single-plays. Not only did the Badgers only draw No. 2 Michigan State and No. 11 Ohio State once each, but both the Spartans and Buckeyes have to come to Madison this season. There are two key stretches for Wisconsin – a four-game stretch in January that includes three home games against Iowa, Illinois and No. 7 Michigan and a trip to Indiana – and throughout the entire month of February. In addition to the home dates with Michigan State and Ohio State, plays all those teams from that key January stretch again and also play a home game against Minnesota.

If the Badgers can get any decent-sized contribution from Kaminsky and maybe one other player in the front-court, the back-court is strong enough and the Big Ten schedule is favorable enough that Wisconsin has a solid shot at finishing top 4 again in the conference and continuing its run of consecutive NCAA Tournament appearances come March.