

2013-14 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Nebraska (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 Nebraska. The Cornhuskers will only play Iowa once this season on Dec. 31 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

In Tim Miles' first season as Nebraska's head coach, one could make the case that the Cornhuskers overachieved. Given what little Miles was inheriting, Nebraska was picked by many to finish dead last in the Big Ten. Except the Cornhuskers actually finished 10th in the Big Ten. Not only that, but they even won their first round game at the Big Ten Tournament against Purdue before getting crushed the following evening by Ohio State.

Once again, Nebraska is being considered by many to be the worst team in the Big Ten. But kind of like how last year turned out, that might not actually be the case. For one thing, there's a little momentum building for Miles and his program now with the Cornhuskers officially opening Pinnacle Bank Arena later this week. The new arena is something Nebraska has been looking toward for quite some time and it should provide more of a home-court advantage now than the Devaney Center ever did.

Now the thing that stands out with Nebraska this season is a lot of new faces in place and eligible. Gone are two of the Cornhuskers' top players from last year in Dylan Talley (who

led them in scoring with 13.7 points per game) and Brandon Ubel (who led them in rebounding with 6.7 boards per contest). These are two huge losses considering the roles they both played a year ago.

The three starters who return are senior guard Ray Gallegos, sophomore wing Shavon Shields and junior forward David Rivers. Gallegos started all 33 of Nebraska's games last season along with Talley and was second behind Talley in scoring. Gallegos also recorded a team-high 46 steals as a junior. In his freshman season, Shields was among the team leaders in shooting percentage and was second to Ubel in rebounding with 5.1 boards per game.

Sergej Vucetic returns after appearing in 11 games last season and the 7-1 center provides the Cornhuskers with size in their front-court, which they'll need with Ubel and Andre Almeida both gone.

On the transfer side of things, Nebraska will have three players eligible this season and all three could potentially play vital roles. Deverell Biggs redshirted last year after transferring from Seward Community College in Kansas, where he was one of the top junior college players nationally. Terran Petteway is a 6-6 wing who transferred from Texas Tech and Walter Pitchford is a 6-10 forward who can also provide Nebraska with front-court size after transferring from Florida.

But as far as newcomers are concerned, there's really one name that needs to be known because he should have an immediate impact in the backcourt – 6-4 freshman guard Tai Webster. A native of New Zealand, Webster was a member of its national team in the 2012 FIBA World Olympic Qualifying Tournament and played in its National Basketball League there this past summer. He was also rated a four-star recruit coming out of high school and was the biggest get for Miles in his freshman class.

Looking at the Cornhuskers' schedule, the one game that really stands out is the Pinnacle Bank Arena opener on Nov. 8, when Florida Gulf Coast (yes, that Florida Gulf Coast that reached the Sweet 16 last March) visits Lincoln. The Cornhuskers also host reigning ACC champion Miami (Fla.) as part of the Big Ten/ACC Challenge and will play road games this December against in-state rival Creighton on Dec. 8 and Cincinnati on Dec. 28, just before opening Big Ten play.

As for the conference portion, the good news is Nebraska's single-plays include No. 20 Wisconsin and No. 2 Michigan State. However, the first five games of its Big Ten schedule are absolutely brutal. The Cornhuskers open with three of their first four away from Lincoln, starting with a trip to Iowa on Dec. 31 (another single-play). From there, they play No. 11 Ohio State, play their Big Ten home opener Jan. 9 against No. 7 Michigan, then play at Purdue. Following a bye, Nebraska returns home to play the Buckeyes a second time on Jan. 20. Again, it's a brutal start to Big Ten play.

But with that being said, the schedule's fair for this team and where it is. There are enough games non-conference that are winnable and the Cornhuskers can also make a strong run in the Charleston Classic later this month. And while Big Ten play starts off difficult, Nebraska appears to have the kind of team that could be a thorn to other Big Ten squads later in the season when its collection of newcomers have finally meshed together. The Cornhuskers aren't a tourney team by any stretch, but they're also not the worst team in the Big Ten and they should be able to win a few games late in the season that on paper, one might think they won't win.

Nebraska has the right coach in place with Miles and considering how last year's version avoided the basement, there's no reason to think this year's squad can't finish 11th or better.