

2013-14 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Minnesota (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 Minnesota. The Golden Gophers will play Iowa twice this season – Jan. 19 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, and Feb. 25 at Williams Arena in Minneapolis, Minn.

What started out to be a promising 2012-13 season for Minnesota ended in total chaos. Yes, the Golden Gophers reached the NCAA Tournament as a No. 11 seed and even won a tournament game against UCLA before being eliminated in the Round of 32 by Florida. But that wasn't enough for Tubby Smith to keep his job.

Smith was let go after a season that at one point featured Minnesota ranked as high as 12th nationally ended with the Golden Gophers finishing below .500 in Big Ten play and losing in the first round of the Big Ten Tournament to Illinois. Now enter Richard Pitino.

The son of the Hall-of-Fame coach that just guided Louisville to a national championship, Pitino takes over in the Twin Cities after spending one season as the head coach at FIU, where he went 18-14. Last season was his first as a head coach at the collegiate level, as Pitino paid his dues as an assistant both to his father Rick and also at Florida to current Gators head coach Billy Donovan.

To say Pitino has a tough task ahead of him would be an understatement. He might very well end up being a solid hire for the Golden Gophers, but given how some of the factors to ultimately do Smith in at Minnesota won't be rectified anytime soon, there could be plenty of traction for Pitino in this first season with the Golden Gophers.

Here's the good news for Pitino – his backcourt looks pretty strong. It's led by junior point guard Andre Hollins and senior 2-guard Austin Hollins (no relation between the two Hollins), who were the Golden Gophers' top two leading scorers in 2012-13. Andre also led the team in assists and was named all-Big Ten honorable mention, while Austin's 59 steals a season ago were a team-high and he returns after finishing fourth in the conference in 3-point field goal percentage. Again, that's the good news.

Now here's the bad – the front-court saw its two best players from last season both graduate, as neither Rodney Williams nor Trevor Mbakwe are around in 2013-14. Both Williams and Mbakwe were among the league's top 10 players in blocked shots last season and in the case of Mbakwe, he led the Big Ten in rebounding, averaging 8.7 rebounds per game.

More than likely, the two players who take over inside for Williams and Mbakwe this season will be juniors Elliott Eliason and Maurice Walker. Eliason is a 6-11 center who started 13 games as a sophomore and was third on the team in blocked shots. He can also rebound, as evident by his 115 boards last season, but he's not the scoring threat those other guys were. Same can be said for Walker, a 6-10 forward who slimmed down to 260 pounds after he weighed in at 310 when Pitino first arrived.

As far as newcomers, the one player who might actually have the biggest impact isn't any of Minnesota's freshmen, but a fifth-year senior transfer. Malik Smith is a 6-2 guard who is eligible to play this season after making the decision to

follow his head coach from FIU to Minnesota. Last season, Smith averaged 14.1 points per game and was third-team all-Sun Belt while starting 31 of 32 games for the Panthers. Adding him to a back-court with Andre and Austin Hollins could potentially pay dividends.

The highlight of the non-conference schedule is a trip to Maui Invitational later this month. However, the Golden Gophers' Maui itinerary begins with a contest against No. 8 Syracuse, a team that reached the Final Four last season. Also in the field on the opposite side of Minnesota's bracket are No. 15 Gonzaga (who was a No. 1 seed in last season's NCAA Tournament) and reigning NIT champion Baylor, who enters this season ranked 25th. In addition to the Maui Invitational, Minnesota plays a road game at Richmond and hosts Florida State as part of the Big Ten/ACC Challenge.

Now the Big Ten schedule is brutal, particularly the entire month of January. The Golden Gophers open with a pair of home games against No. 7 Michigan and Purdue, then travel to Penn State and No. 2 Michigan State back-to-back. From there, No. 11 Ohio State visits the Barn, then Minnesota plays at Iowa, home against No. 20 Wisconsin and at Nebraska. It's not inconceivable to suggest the Golden Gophers start out 0-7 or even 0-8 in league play. Then the end of the season features a 3-game stretch consisting of at Ohio State, vs. Iowa, at Michigan.

Again, Pitino might do well at Minnesota with time. But if this team ends up finishing dead last in the Big Ten this season – even with a point guard as talented as Andre Hollins is – it wouldn't come as a huge surprise.