

2013-14 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Northwestern (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 Northwestern. The Wildcats will play Iowa twice this season – Jan. 9 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, and Jan. 25 at Welsh-Ryan Arena in Evanston, Ill.

After 13 seasons of running the Princeton Offense and 1-3-1 zone, Northwestern made what was probably a necessary coaching change this offseason after a disastrous 2012-13 campaign where the Wildcats were depleted by injuries and apathy began to sink into the program. Gone is Bill Carmody, and in is Chris Collins, the son of former NBA head coach Doug Collins.

Collins became the Wildcat head coach after both playing at Duke for Mike Krzyzewski and then serving 13 seasons as an assistant at his alma mater for Coach K. This was a legitimate hire Northwestern made and one that eventually should lead to the Wildcats making their first ever NCAA Tournament appearance. Just not this season.

The problem Collins will face this season is simple – getting players to adjust from what they've always known under Carmody to playing the style he wants to implement. He even acknowledged that this year would be one where some of the principles of the Princeton Offense and 1-3-1 zone would be applied just to allow some current players to showcase their strengths.

Most of the names on this year's Wildcat roster remain familiar. The best news Northwestern received this offseason was Drew Crawford announcing he'd return as a fifth-year senior after a shoulder injury 10 games into last season ended what would've otherwise been his senior campaign. Amazingly, Crawford still finished as Northwestern's leading scorer from last season despite playing just 10 games. His return alone improves Northwestern and he's probably the one player who won't struggle adjusting to Collins' system.

Also coming back this season is junior JerShon Cobb. The 6-5 guard was suspended before last season even began for academic reasons. Cobb started 25 games as a freshman in 2010-11 and then improved some of his numbers as a sophomore in 2011-12.

The only player on last year's squad to start every game was point guard Dave Sobolewski, who returns for his junior season. As a sophomore, Sobolewski averaged 9.8 points per game while leading the Wildcats in assists and finishing second on the team in steals.

Joining Crawford out on the wing will be sophomore Kale Abrahamson, who started 17 games as a freshman in 2012-13. Abrahamson is a 6-7 forward who will be counted on to drain 3-pointers after sinking 35.1 percent of his 3-pointers a year ago. Inside, 7-0 center Alex Olah returns for his sophomore campaign after he started 29 games and averaged 6.1 points and 4.1 rebounds per contest.

In terms of newcomers, Northwestern has three freshmen players that redshirted last season and one true freshman joining this season in 6-7 forward Nathan Taphorn. As a high-school senior in Pekin, Ill., Taphorn averaged 16 points and seven rebounds per game.

Northwestern's schedule features some interesting non-conference games. After opening the season Nov. 9 against Eastern Illinois, the Wildcats will travel to Stanford on Nov.

14 to face another program coached by a former Duke player and assistant, Johnny Dawkins. Over Thanksgiving weekend, Northwestern will participate in the Las Vegas Invitational, where it will play Missouri and No. 22 UCLA on back-to-back nights. Immediately following that is a trip to North Carolina State as part of the Big Ten/ACC Challenge.

In Big Ten play, the entire month of January will prove absolutely brutal for the Wildcats. It features two games against No. 20 Wisconsin, two games against Iowa, home games against Illinois, No. 2 Michigan State and Purdue, and road games at No. 7 Michigan and Indiana. If Northwestern manages to win two or even three of these nine games in January, it could potentially bode well later in the season when the schedule doesn't become as fierce. February does feature trips to Michigan State and No. 11 Ohio State, but the Wildcats also get to play Nebraska and Minnesota twice during the second half of the season, plus their final home game in March against Penn State.

Northwestern's a team that because of its coach and because some of its key players are back healthy could end up being a little better than expected. But it's going to be rough early on. How the Wildcats fare in January during Big Ten play will define what they have the rest of the season and what they'll be able to do under Collins going forward.