

2013-14 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Ohio State (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 Ohio State. The Buckeyes enter this season ranked 11th nationally and will play Iowa twice this season – Jan. 12 at Value City Arena in Columbus, Ohio, and Feb. 4 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

Although Ohio State finished second in the Big Ten last season, the Buckeyes were able to win three straight games en route to a Big Ten Tournament title and reached the Elite Eight where a loss to Wichita State prevented them from reaching a second straight Final Four.

This season, Ohio State remains a legitimate contender to win the Big Ten. Given what returns to Thad Matta's disposal in Columbus, there's no reason to think the Buckeyes can't at least finish top three in the conference and make another deep run in the NCAA Tournament.

It starts with senior point guard Aaron Craft, who is probably the best point guard in the Big Ten, if not one of the top point guards in the entire country. Yes, the new hand-checking rules being enforced in college basketball this season could potentially alter his game. But where Craft began to separate himself from being a good to great point guard was late last season, as he became a more aggressive scorer and wasn't afraid to take big shots like the one he buried to beat Iowa State in the NCAA Tournament.

As a junior, Craft was second on Ohio State in scoring (10 points per game), led the Buckeyes in assists (and was second in the Big Ten in assists behind Michigan's Trey Burke) and his 77 steals were second in the entire Big Ten. If his shooting becomes consistent like it started to near the end of last season, he could end up having a big senior season for Ohio State.

But it's not just Craft. The Buckeyes return three other starters from last year's squad. The loss is a big one in Deshaun Thomas, who led the Big Ten in scoring last season and opted to forego his senior season. Thomas was taken in the second round of last summer's NBA Draft by the San Antonio Spurs. Even with Thomas' absence though, it's not as though Matta is completely reloading this season.

The three starters returning along with Craft are senior guard Lenzelle Smith Jr., junior forward Sam Thompson and junior center Amir Williams. Smith Jr., averaged 9.2 points per game as a junior last season and was second to Thomas on the team in rebounds. Thompson is probably better known for some of his flashy dunks, but he was also the Buckeyes' top 3-point shooter in 2012-13. Williams finally came on as the starting center and compiled 51 blocked shots.

Two other players who look to remain key contributors for the Buckeyes this season are junior forward LaQuinton Ross and junior guard Shannon Scott. Ross will likely take over the starting role left behind by Thomas this season, as he appeared in all 37 of Ohio State's games last season. Averaging around 17 minutes per game, Ross had a scoring average of 8.3 points per contest as a sophomore. As a starter, his point and rebound protection should both go up. Meanwhile, Scott might be the back-up point guard to Craft, but he still manages to see plenty of minutes on the floor for the Buckeyes. He might not be the scorer Craft has become, but Scott has also put up pretty solid assist and steal numbers that are somewhat comparable to Craft.

Something to keep in mind with Ohio State is that Matta historically doesn't go too deep into his bench. He has certain players he likes to stick with and these six players mentioned above are the core of this season's Buckeye squad. That said, Matta does have a pair of freshmen entering this season that could potentially have impacts, as both 6-2 guard Kam Williams and 6-7 forward Marc Loving were both rated as four-star recruits coming out of high school.

Looking at the Buckeyes' non-conference schedule, there's an intriguing early-season match-up Nov. 16 at No. 17 Marquette. It's intriguing because these teams were supposed to meet last season on an aircraft carrier, but they were unable to play the game. Ohio State also plays host to future Big Ten member Maryland as part of the Big Ten/ACC Challenge, as well as No. 21 Notre Dame in the Gotham Classic at Madison Square Garden.

As for Big Ten play, the Buckeyes have a pretty brutal start with four of their first six Big Ten games being played away from Value City Arena. Those final two games in March at Indiana and at home against No. 2 Michigan State will be pinpointed for obvious reasons, but the key stretch for Ohio State comes in February. The Buckeyes play back-to-back road games at No. 20 Wisconsin (a single play) and at Iowa, then draw Purdue and No. 7 Michigan at Value City Arena before playing another road game at Illinois. That Michigan game is potentially significant because it's the only time the Buckeyes and Wolverines will meet during the regular season.

Ohio State might not win the Big Ten, but the Buckeyes are a team that will remain in the conversation deep into the month of March. This year is really no exception.