

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

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

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 Penn State. The Nittany Lions will only play Iowa once this season on Feb. 15 at Bryce Jordan Center in State College, Pa.

Last season, Penn State looked to make a big jump in what was Year Two under head coach Patrick Chambers. But the season took a disastrous turn last November, when a ruptured Achilles' tendon forced all-Big Ten guard Tim Frazier to sit out the remainder of the season.

From there, the Nittany Lions' season took a major nosedive. Yes, Penn State found itself in close, hard-fought games. But they only managed to win two Big Ten games and finished dead last without the services of their all-around best player.

With Frazier back in the mix, plus having a team more catered to what Chambers wants to accomplish, there's some reason for optimism around State College. There's a nucleus of talent for Chambers to build around and it's a reason why – barring further significant injuries – Penn State should be a much improved team from one season ago.

Here's why Frazier's return is so huge – he was first-team all-Big Ten as a junior during the 2011-12 season. He was second in the Big Ten in scoring and led the conference in assists and steals. He was also the Nittany Lions' leading

rebounder. In other words, he was the go-to guy Penn State lacked last season with him being out.

Now not only does Frazier return, but he gets to be paired alongside the player who ended up carrying most of the weight in 2012-13, junior guard D.J. Newbill. With Frazier out, Newbill found himself playing more at the point despite being 6-4. Frazier's return now allows Newbill – who led the Nittany Lions in scoring and assists last season – to move back to his more natural position at the 2-spot. Together, this duo is one of the top backcourts in the entire conference.

Penn State also brings back two other starters from last season in junior forward Ross Travis and sophomore forward Brandon Taylor. Travis is listed at 6-7 and to go along with his seven points per game average, he also led the Nittany Lions in rebounding during the 2012-13 campaign. Meanwhile, Taylor returns after among one of Penn State's better 3-point shooters.

Senior forward Alan Wisniewski saw himself receiving more playing time late last season and at 6-9, he might become more of a contributor for the Nittany Lions as his minutes increase. Sophomore forward Donovan Jack is another player who could find himself playing a bigger role as opposed to a year ago.

Penn State has seven new players on its roster this season, but the one who might have the biggest impact is a fifth-year senior transfer. Allen Roberts is a 6-3 guard who joined the Nittany Lions this year after previously playing at Miami (Ohio). With his ability to shoot 3-pointers, he'll get a chance at minutes alongside both Frazier and Newbill.

Looking at the non-conference slate, it sets up nicely for Penn State as far as being able to win games and build confidence going into Big Ten play is concerned. Sweet 16 participant La Salle visits Bryce Jordan Center on Nov. 19,

and the Nittany Lions will play both St. John's and either Georgia Tech or Ole Miss at the Barclays Center Classic in Brooklyn over Thanksgiving weekend. There is also a trip to Pittsburgh for the Big Ten/ACC Challenge, plus a home game against Princeton on Dec. 14 that will be played in Penn State's old basketball arena, Rec Hall.

In Big Ten play, there's a 3-week stretch consisting of six consecutive games that would be brutal by most measures. It begins Jan. 29 with a trip to No. 11 Ohio State. What follows in February are the following games – home against Purdue on Super Bowl Sunday, at No. 2 Michigan State, Illinois at home, at Indiana, and Iowa at home. That's not to say there aren't other difficult stretches for the Nittany Lions, but this will be the most difficult stretch in the conference.

Is Penn State a team that can reach the NCAA Tournament this season? Probably not. But a NIT berth shouldn't seem that far-fetched a possibility, especially given what Chambers has coming back this season. The Nittany Lions were a better team than their record showed in 2012-13. It shouldn't surprise if the improvement does show in the standings here in 2013-14.