

2013-14 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Iowa

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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. The series concludes with a look at the Iowa Hawkeyes, who are coming off a 25-13 season last year that concluded with a loss to Baylor in the NIT Championship Game.

For the last three years now, Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery has built the Iowa men's basketball program back up to being respectable again on a national level. Now in Year Four, this should be the season where the Hawkeyes finally return to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2006.

In saying that however, there are still some questions that haven't been answered yet and won't be answered until Iowa takes the hardwood.

The first and most important question here is how McCaffery handles using an 11-man rotation this season. For the time being, the starting lineup will consist of senior Devyn Marble at the point, sophomore Mike Gesell at the 2-guard, junior Aaron White at the 3, senior Melsahn Basabe at the 4 and sophomore Adam Woodbury at center. As far as rotations are concerned, they'll depend on match-ups each game. But more often than not, senior Zach McCabe, sophomore Jarrod Uthoff and junior Gabe Olaseni will likely be the first three players to come off the bench. Where it'll get interesting is with the three guards and how McCaffery decides to utilize them – junior Josh Oglesby, freshman Peter Jok and sophomore Anthony Clemmons.

Having 11 players to utilize obviously presents a lot of unique opportunities for McCaffery. But it'll also be a challenge for him making sure he's able to push the right buttons on a nightly basis because consistency with rotations might not exist if a match-up one night is entirely different from another match-up the next night.

Secondly, there's 3-point shooting. This has to improve from last season if the Hawkeyes are going to have any shot at playing for a spot in the NCAA Tournament or even competing for a Big Ten title. McCaffery has stressed how Iowa wants to be a team that attacks offensively and with the new defensive rule changes in place, attacking the rim and drawing contact will probably become even more of a focal point in the game plan than it already was. But if opposing teams adjust by playing more zone as a result of the new rules, the outside shooting has to be effective for Iowa.

The third thing worth addressing is just as critical as 3-point shooting, which is winning close games. At one point last season, Iowa had so many excruciating losses in Big Ten play – specifically on the road – where a bucket here or a defensive stop there could've made an enormous difference on how the rest of the season went. As the year went on, McCaffery became more comfortable with a late-game rotation worth sticking with. But that rotation included Eric May and with him no longer around, someone has to fill his void.

One would have to think Marble, Gesell and White are certainties to see the floor late (barring foul trouble). So who else can step in and make key plays late in close games that maybe allow Iowa to win those games this year as opposed to having a similar fate? The earlier McCaffery and his staff are able to figure this out, the better off Iowa is long term because the one time where consistency will prove vital is at the end of games.

The fourth question here is how much tougher is the non-

conference schedule? At the moment, the only guarantees are Iowa playing No. 21 Notre Dame at Carver-Hawkeye Arena as part of the Big Ten/ACC Challenge and a trip to Iowa State on Dec. 13. The key game on the schedule is Thanksgiving Day when the Hawkeyes play their first contest at the Battle 4 Atlantis against Xavier.

Iowa should be undefeated entering that game and should be favored to win that game. If the Hawkeyes do win, then the possibilities of playing teams like Tennessee, Villanova or No. 4 Kansas likely present themselves. Should they lose to the Musketeers though, they're likely looking at playing UTEP and then either USC or Wake Forest. In terms of measurements used by the NCAA Tournament Selection Committee, this could make a huge difference when it comes to seeding because let's face it, playing Tennessee and then either Villanova or Kansas and getting at least a split of those last two contests is much better than a fifth place finish with wins over two teams that probably won't be in the NCAA Tournament.

Now let's get to the final key question, which is how Iowa stacks up compared to the rest of the Big Ten? Are the Hawkeyes a top-six team in the conference? Absolutely. Can they realistically compete for a Big Ten title? Absolutely. However, there might not be a tougher schedule in the Big Ten this season.

There are four Big Ten teams ranked in the AP's Preseason Top 25 – No. 2 Michigan State, No. 7 Michigan, No. 11 Ohio State and No. 20 Wisconsin. Iowa has to play all four of these teams twice each. The other team right there with the Hawkeyes on the outside looking in is Indiana, and Iowa's lone contest with the Hoosiers is at Assembly Hall in Bloomington, Ind. That's half of the Hawkeyes' Big Ten slate right there and considering Iowa only played three of those ranked teams once each of the previous two seasons, the task here is a tall one.

That also doesn't include a trip to the State Farm Center in

Champaign, Ill. – where the Hawkeyes haven't won since the Tom Davis era – and the only meeting this season against a much-improved Penn State squad taking place at Bryce Jordan Center in State College, Pa. Those two games might be ones Iowa's favored to win, but both will prove challenging.

The Big Ten might not be as top-heavy as it was last season, which is a fair reason to suggest Iowa can compete for a league title, even with this schedule it faces. When assessing the conference though, its depth from top-to-bottom should be improved, which is why Iowa's final record in Big Ten play might end up being at or close to the 9-9 mark it had last season. This isn't to say Iowa can't go 11-7 or 12-6 or even 13-5 (which is probably what wins the Big Ten this year because of its depth). But the Hawkeyes are going to have to beat some of those ranked teams and that two-week stretch in late January/early February that features the aforementioned trip to Illinois and home games against the Spartans, Buckeyes and Wolverines will dictate where Iowa finishes in the Big Ten. It'll also need to win 1-2 of those road games that it probably wouldn't have won in years past.

Just look back at Indiana last season. Yes, the Hoosiers were the preseason No. 1 team coming into 2012-13. Indiana also won the Big Ten outright because it beat Ohio State on the road, it beat Michigan State on the road and on the final day of the regular season, it beat Michigan on the road. If a Big Ten title is the real measuring stick for this Iowa team, then that's what needs to happen for the Hawkeyes if they want to reach their aspirations.

At the end of the day, Iowa is probably somewhere between fourth and sixth in the Big Ten, competing alongside the likes of Wisconsin and Indiana. Again, this team should reach the NCAA Tournament. How deep the Hawkeyes can go will ultimately depend on their region, what seed they are and who they're playing, but being among the 68 teams dancing regardless of their overall record and where they finish in the Big Ten is a

fair expectation for fans to have.

Assuming Iowa finishes around where most pundits expect it to, the Hawkeyes are probably looking at being anywhere from as high as a 6-seed to as low as a 10-seed. Obviously, this will depend on record, RPI, Pomeroy rankings, etc. But look at it this way – Iowa's ranked 29th at the moment. That would theoretically suggest the Hawkeyes would be around an 8-seed if the tourney started today. That would mean sharing a pod with a team like No. 1 Kentucky, No. 3 Louisville or No. 5 Duke. A 7-seed would mean sharing a pod with a team ranked somewhere between 6-10.

The Hawkeyes are a good team and a very likable team, one that their fans should want to embrace. Now in Year Four, it's time to see what Iowa is made of. How it answers these five questions on the court with its actions will be intriguing to watch over the course of this season.

Click on the other links below to read our season previews of the other Big Ten teams (please note you must have either a paid monthly or yearly subscription, or a three-day free trial, to *HawkeyeDrive.com* to access all of these):

[Illinois](#) – Feb. 1 (A), March 8/9 (H)

[Indiana](#) – Feb. 18 (A)

[Michigan](#) – Jan. 22 (A), Feb. 8 (H)

[Michigan State](#) – Jan. 28 (H), March 6 (A)

[Minnesota](#) – Jan. 19 (H), Feb. 25 (A)

[Nebraska](#) – Dec. 31 (H)

[Northwestern](#) – Jan. 9 (H), Jan. 25 (A)

[Ohio State](#) – Jan. 12 (A), Feb. 4 (H)

[Penn State](#) – Feb. 15 (A)

[Purdue](#) – March 1/2 (H)

[Wisconsin](#) – Jan. 5 (A), Feb. 22 (H)

(H) – Home game for Iowa; (A) – Away game for Iowa