

2014 Big Ten football previews: Penn State (premium)

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The first team I'll discuss in our series of Big Ten season previews is the Penn State Nittany Lions. Iowa does not play Penn State in 2014.

After decades of coaching stability, Penn State finds itself in a unique situation with having its second head coach in three years after former Vanderbilt coach James Franklin took over for the outgoing Bill O'Brien, who left State College to coach the NFL's Houston Texans.

On the recruiting trail, Franklin is already leaving his mark on both the Big Ten and the entire Eastern seaboard of the country. From a business perspective, he's selling the program as passionately as one can sell a product and his high-energy level has left its mark on the players he inherited from O'Brien.

All that being said though, it's going to take time for Franklin to build Penn State into what he envisions it being. That's not to say the Nittany Lions will be atrocious in 2014, but roster depth is still an alarming concern given the sanctions levied against the program in 2012 and like his predecessor, Franklin has the challenge of motivating a team that still isn't allowed to compete for a Big Ten title or participate in any bowl games for the next two seasons.

Offensively, this will likely be a more run-oriented team in 2014 given the personnel. Penn State has the best young

quarterback in the entire Big Ten with sophomore Christian Hackenberg. As a true freshman last season, Hackenberg threw for nearly 3,000 yards and had a 2-to-1 touchdown-to-interception ratio.

Hackenberg will have two things aiding him in 2014 – a senior-laden backfield and one of the conference's top tight ends. The Nittany Lions boast a 1-2 punch of senior running backs Zach Zwinak and Bill Belton. This duo combined for 1,792 yards and 17 touchdowns on the ground last season. Penn State also brings back.

The tight end group is led by junior Jesse James, who is coming off a season where he caught 25 passes for 333 yards receiving and three touchdowns. In 2014, Penn State could be using as many as three tight ends at a time between him, junior Kyle Carter and sophomore Adam Brennemman. But assuming he's able to stay healthy, expect a spike in James' numbers this fall because of the inexperience in the Nittany Lions' receiving corps.

For the last two seasons, Penn State had the luxury of possessing one of the country's best wideouts in Allen Robinson. He alone accounted for nearly half of the Nittany Lions' production through the air last season and 69 receptions stood between him and the next-closest Penn State player in that category.

Sitting atop the preseason depth chart were a pair of juniors – DeShawn Baker and Matt Zanellato. Baker hasn't played a single snap in three seasons, while Zanellato only has six career receptions. After them are a bunch of underclassmen. This is a major question mark entering 2014 and one of the biggest reasons why Hackenberg's numbers this fall might not be similar to what he did last year.

Up front, Penn State only returns two starting offensive linemen and one of them is switching sides of the line. Senior

Miles Dieffenbach started every game at left guard last season and is now listed as the starting right guard. Junior Donovan Smith is the other returnee at left tackle. Beyond those two though again is a lot of uncertainty and it's not a real deep group either, so any injuries along the line could be crippling to this offense.

Defensively, the Nittany Lions will continue using a 4-3 look under Franklin. Senior defensive end C.J. Olanyian returns as the front four's leader following a junior campaign where he posted team-highs of five sacks and three forced fumbles to go with his 50 tackles. Junior Deion Barnes is also back at the other end spot. Inside, the name to potentially watch is junior Anthony Zettel, who moved to tackle from end during the spring.

The linebacking corps lost the team's leading tackler in Glenn Carson, but senior Mike Hull returns as the next big name from "Linebacker U." Hull was second on the Nittany Lions with 78 tackles in 2013 and will be joined alongside sophomore Nyeem Wartman, who had 32 tackles and four pass break ups last year.

The most experienced portion of Penn State's defense is the secondary, which features experienced players in all four spots. Junior Jordan Lucas returns at corner after starting all 12 games in 2013, a season where he was third on the team with 65 tackles, had a team-high 13 pass break ups and had three interceptions that was tied for a team-high with senior free safety Ryan Keiser. Penn State also returns senior Adrian Amos, who played at both safety and corner in 2013 and junior Trevor Williams, who started six games at corner.

On special teams, the story is senior kicker Sam Ficken and the possibility of him also handling punting duties in 2014 on top of all the placekicking duties. Ficken has never been the Nittany Lions' punter, but he has attempted 46 field goals during his career and only made 30 of them (exactly half of those came last season as he went 15-of-23).

In terms of the schedule, Penn State had two quirks. One is opening the season in Dublin, Ireland, against a UCF squad that beat the Nittany Lions at Beaver Stadium last season en route to winning the Fiesta Bowl. The other is opening Big Ten play two weeks before anyone else when it rekindles an old rivalry with Rutgers on Sept. 13. The other road game of note is Oct. 11 when it plays under the lights against Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Meanwhile, the home schedule is quite challenging as Northwestern, Ohio State, Maryland and Michigan State all visit Beaver Stadium this fall. In a season where Penn State wasn't dealing with NCAA sanctions, this would be seen as an enormous positive.

What will be interesting to watch with this team is how it progresses over the course of the year. At first glimpse, the Nittany Lions look like a 7-5 team again in 2014. But more so with them versus any other Big Ten team, injuries at key positions could absolutely derail this season. Brighter days may be ahead for Franklin and his program, but Penn State won't be there quite yet when this season kicks off.

AUDIO:

Penn State linebacker Mike Hull –

<http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Mike-Hull-2014-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>