

2014 Big Ten football previews: Rutgers (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

After looking at [Penn State](#) on Friday, we turn our attention to previewing the upcoming season for one of the Big Ten's two newest members, the Rutgers Scarlet Knights. Iowa does not play Rutgers in 2014.

The anticipation of Rutgers joining the Big Ten has begun to subside and simply put, this is going to be a long season for the Scarlet Knights.

Yes, Rutgers has appeared in three straight bowl games and has gone to a bowl eight of the last nine years after having only been to one bowl game before 2005. It speaks volumes to what Greg Schiano was able to build there and what Kyle Flood has since been able to maintain. But this first season in the Big Ten is going to be daunting for Flood, who is now in his third year as the Scarlet Knights' head coach.

Offensively, Rutgers has a new offensive coordinator in former Maryland head coach Ralph Friedgen, who is returning to coaching this fall after a three-year hiatus. He inherits an offense with nine returning starters, but this offense was 95th nationally in total offense last season and has a question mark at quarterback.

Senior Gary Nova was recently named Rutgers' starting quarterback for 2014. He started the Scarlet Knights' first 10 games, but was benched in favor of Chas Dodd for the final three contests, including the Pinstripe Bowl loss to Notre Dame. The big issue with Nova has been accuracy as he has yet to complete 60 percent of his passes in a single season and

threw 30 interceptions over the 23 consecutive games he started between 2012-2013.

Nova will have some help in his backfield though with senior fullback Michael Burton and junior running back Paul James both returning. Burton is one of the team's most highly-regarded players while James is coming off a season where he appeared in nine games and rushed for 881 yards and nine touchdowns on 156 carries.

Rutgers also returns senior tight end Tyler Kroft, who actually led the Scarlet Knights in both receptions and receiving yards, hauling in 43 catches 573 yards. He also had four touchdown receptions, which tied for second on the team. Junior wideout Leonte Carroo led Rutgers with nine touchdown receptions and both he and sophomore Ruhann Peele had 28 catches each last season. Another name to watch in the receiving corps is sophomore Andre Patton, who started a pair of games as a true freshman in 2013.

If this offense has any strength, it might be up front as the Scarlet Knights return all five of their starting offensive linemen. In the four games they all started together last season, Rutgers won three of them (the lone loss came at Louisville). Senior left guard Kaleb Johnson and junior left tackle Keith Lumpkin started all 13 games in 2013, while sophomore right guard Chris Muller made 12 starts and senior right tackle Taj Alexander made 11 starts. Senior center Betim Bujari started seven games at center last season.

The offense has high hopes, but defense is a major concern with Rutgers. Although the Scarlet Knights boasted one of the nation's top run defenses in 2013, their pass defense was one of the nation's worst as it surrendered 312 yards through the air per contest.

The front four is led by junior defensive tackle Darius Hamilton, who was second among all Scarlet Knight defensive

linemen last season with 48 tackles and 4.5 sacks. Rutgers will have to fill the void left by Marcus Thompson, who led the team in both defensive categories last season.

If there's a reason to think the defense might be better, it would be because of the linebacking corps. As a redshirt freshman last season, Steve Longa started every game at middle linebacker and led the Scarlet Knights with 123 tackles. The team's second-leading tackler also returns in senior Kevin Snyder, who had 96 of them. Junior Quentin Gause will likely be a full-time starter on the strong side this fall after he was fourth on the team in tackles despite only making one start.

Then there's the secondary, which got burned quite a bit in 2013. Senior strong safety Lorenzo Waters had 62 tackles last season and also tied for a team-high four pass break ups with sophomore cornerback Anthony Cioffi. Outside of Waters though, none of the other experienced players have established themselves to this point.

On special teams, Rutgers will be fielding a new punter in junior Joe Field and while junior kicker Kyle Federico is back to handle field goals and PATs, he'll also be handling kickoffs on a full-time basis now. Sophomore wideout Janarion Grant left his mark in the return game last season with two touchdown returns (one punt and one kickoff) and will be handling return duties again in 2014.

Despite returning quite a bit of personnel, one look at Rutgers' schedule is all one needs to justify why the Scarlet Knights will struggle this season. First, they open the season in Seattle against a Washington State squad that is very pass-oriented and if improvements haven't been made to the pass defense, that game may just be the tip of the iceberg. The Scarlet Knights also have a road game at Navy, which follows their Big Ten opener at home against Penn State on Sept. 13.

That game against Penn State might also be Rutgers' best chance at a win in Big Ten play. The Scarlet Knights also play Indiana at home later in the season, but that game could be disaster depending on the pass defense. Michigan and Wisconsin both visit High Point Solutions Stadium this fall as well and both will be favored against Rutgers.

Then there's the road slate, which is easily the most brutal road schedule of any Big Ten team. In October, Rutgers plays a pair of back-to-backs against Ohio State and Nebraska away from New Brunswick. The season then concludes with two straight road games against defending Big Ten champion Michigan State and the league's other new member, Maryland.

As it stands now, Rutgers might be the worst team in the East Division and going 0-8 in conference play isn't far-fetched. More so than with Maryland, this is truly going to be a transition year for Flood and his program and it will likely be a few seasons before the Scarlet Knights have any real shot at vying for a Big Ten title.

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AUDIO:

Rutgers strong safety Lorenzo Waters –

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