

2014 Big Ten football previews: Michigan (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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After examining [Penn State](#) and [Rutgers](#), the next Big Ten team we will preview is the Michigan Wolverines. Iowa does not play Michigan in 2014.

There's no other way to put it other than Michigan took a step back in 2013. The Wolverines weren't a team that was expected to win the now-defunct Legends Division last season, but 2013 was a year to forget as Michigan went 7-6 and lost the Buffalo Wild Wings Bowl to Kansas State.

Brady Hoke enters his fourth season as head coach and some are already saying he's on the hot seat. In examining the Wolverines closer, they're probably the third best team in the Big Ten East right now and quite honestly, 2015 could be a big year for Michigan assuming Hoke is still allowed to see everything through.

The Wolverines have a new offensive coordinator in Doug Nussmeier, who joins Hoke's staff after previously holding the same position at Alabama on Nick Saban's staff. Nussmeier has the task of getting a bounce-back season out of senior quarterback Devin Gardner.

Gardner's numbers weren't necessarily terrible. He threw for 2,960 yards and 21 touchdowns and also had 11 rushing touchdowns for the Wolverines while being their second-leading rusher in 2013. But Michigan lost five of its last six games and a lot of that fell on the offense and more specifically, Gardner.

If Gardner isn't able to mesh right away with Nussmeier, this could be another long season for the Wolverines offensively. They no longer have Fitz Toussaint in the backfield and will likely be relying on sophomore Derrick Green and junior Justice Hayes to account for most of the ground game production in 2014. Hayes was very limited last season despite starting the bowl game against Kansas State. Meanwhile, Green had 270 yards rushing on 83 carries.

The other issue Michigan has offensively is inexperience at wide receiver with Jeremy Gallon no longer around. In fact, the one bright spot in the Wolverine passing game is a tight end that will likely be lining out wide even more in 2014. Funchess had 49 catches for 748 yards receiving and six touchdowns, all three of which were second on the team to Gallon. Throw in that fellow sophomore tight end Jake Butt is currently rehabbing from knee surgery and Michigan's entering the fall with Funchess being the only sure option at its disposal on offense.

Up front, the Wolverines' three interior spots are filled with veterans. Junior Graham Glasgow started all 13 games last season, but moved over from left guard to center when Big Ten play began. Sophomore guards Erik Magnuson and Kyle Kalis are being counted on to fill the left and right spots, respectively. The problem Michigan has is the two positions where there was continuity last season have major voids. Taylor Lewan started every game at left tackle and was a first round pick of the Tennessee Titans last spring, while Michael Schofield has also moved on to the NFL after starting at right tackle.

While the offense has uncertainty, the reason for Michigan fans to be excited about 2014 is the Wolverine defense. The one area of concern might be along the defensive line because it no longer features Jibreel Black inside. But senior Frank Clark returns after starting every game at defensive end last season and having a year where he compiled 43 tackles,

including 12 for lost yardage, and two fumble recoveries. Also returning is senior defensive end Brennen Beyer, who is now along the front four for good after making the transition from linebacker during the middle of last season.

Speaking of the linebackers, this is what should excite Michigan fans the most. All three of the Wolverines' starters are back including senior Jake Ryan, who was slowed by an ACL injury last season after compiling 88 tackles in 2012. Along with Ryan are middle linebacker Desmond Morgan and junior weak-side 'backer James Ross III to help form perhaps the best trio of linebackers in the Big Ten.

The secondary returns three starters, including a pair of cornerbacks that combined for 10 interceptions in 2013. Senior Raymon Taylor also led the Wolverines in tackles with 86 of them last season, while junior Blake Countess had his six-interception campaign after taking an injury redshirt in 2012. Junior free safety Jarrod Wilson also returns and Michigan only lost two games in which he started last season. The Wolverines also brought in one of the nation's top recruits in defensive back Jabril Peppers, who will likely be used as a nickel back to start this upcoming season.

On special teams, senior Will Hagerup returns as punter after having to redshirt 2013. As a result, senior Matt Wile will likely be the Wolverines' new place-kicker after he handled punting duties in Hagerup's place last season. Junior wideout Dennis Norfleet will handle return duties again in 2014 after finishing second to Gallon in all-purpose yards.

In terms of the schedule, Michigan has a pretty favorable draw at The Big House. It opens the season hoping to exorcise the demons of 2007 when Appalachian State visits. The Wolverines also draw Utah at home before starting Big Ten play and their Big Ten home slate features Minnesota, Penn State under the lights, Indiana and Maryland.

But it's the road that looks absolutely daunting. Michigan's final game for the foreseeable future against Notre Dame is Sept. 6 in South Bend and the Fighting Irish will have Everett Golson back at QB. The Wolverines' first road game in Big Ten play is in prime time against Rutgers on Oct. 4, but then they also have to visit both Michigan State and Northwestern for the second straight year, plus "The Game" against Ohio State is at The Horseshoe, where Michigan hasn't won since 2000.

This year looks like one that could be similar to 2012, where Michigan went 8-4 and ended up in the Outback Bowl against South Carolina. As long as the Wolverine defense is as stingy as advertised, Michigan should be able to stay in every game this fall. The big question again will be how much can Gardner and the offense get over the hump and put the Wolverines in a position to enter 2015 as one of the conference's favorites.

AUDIO:

Michigan linebacker Jake Ryan –

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