

# 2014 Big Ten football previews: Ohio State (premium)

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So far, we have previewed [Penn State](#), [Rutgers](#) and [Michigan](#). The next Big Ten team we will examine is the Ohio State Buckeyes. Iowa does not play Ohio State in 2014.

Like they do most years, Ohio State had enormously high expectations in 2013 and nearly met them. For the second straight year under Urban Meyer, the Buckeyes went 12-0 in the regular season. But the season's end left a sour taste in Ohio State fans as the Buckeyes first lost the Big Ten Championship Game to Michigan State, then proceeded to give up 35-plus points for the first time ever in a 40-35 loss to Clemson in the Orange Bowl.

Now entering 2014, those same high expectations exist in Columbus. Ohio State will most likely be the highest-ranked Big Ten team when all the preseason polls are out and will be considered by many to be the conference's best shot to make the new four-team College Football Playoff. But whether it actually does or not is another story.

Let's start with the absolute best thing that could have happened to the Buckeyes this offseason, which was quarterback Braxton Miller opting to return for his senior season. Miller was the Big Ten's Most Valuable Player each of the past two years, but it was his passing that made the most strides in 2013 as he completed 63.5 percent of his passes for 2,094 yards and tossed 24 touchdowns to seven interceptions.

Miller still remains a threat to beat defenses with his feet as he posted 12 rushing touchdowns in 2013, but Ohio State is going to need someone to emerge in the backfield with Carlos Hyde no longer around. All Hyde did was average 138.3 rushing yards per game, more than any other Big Ten back. He also had 1,521 yards and 15 touchdowns on the ground to lead the Buckeyes.

Hyde's likely replacement at running back is sophomore Ezekiel Elliott, who had 262 yards rushing on 30 carries last year. Another player who burst on the scene last year and will likely have an even bigger role in Ohio State's offense is sophomore Dontre Wilson, who is listed as a H-Back a la Percy Harvin when he played for Meyer at Florida.

The Buckeyes lost their top receiver from last season in Corey Brown, but still possess three senior playmakers – two wideouts and one tight end – that Miller will be dependent on. Wide receiver Devin Smith caught 44 passes for 660 yards receiving and eight touchdowns, all of which were second to Brown. Joining him in the receiving corps is Evan Spencer, who had 22 grabs for 216 yards and three scores. Then there's tight end Jeff Heuerman, who finished with 26 receptions, 466 yards and four TDs.

On offense, the most glaring concern with Ohio State is up front as it lost four seniors from a year ago. The only returnee is junior Taylor Decker, who started at right tackle and has since moved over to left tackle. The Buckeyes also have the arrival of Alabama transfer Chad Lindsay to look forward to this fall. Lindsay is eligible to play for Ohio State in 2014 after starting four games at center for the Crimson Tide last season.

Defensively, the Buckeyes revamped themselves by hiring Chris Ash away from Arkansas as their new co-defensive coordinator alongside Luke Fickell. Ash inherits a unit that has been atrocious against the pass since Meyer took over, but this

current group features perhaps the best defensive line in the entire country and will have first-year assistant Larry Johnson (formerly the D-line coach at Penn State) working with them.

This front four accounted for 24.5 sacks in 2013. Eight of those sacks came courtesy of junior defensive end Noah Spence, who led the Buckeyes and was second in the Big Ten. Right behind him with 7.5 sacks was sophomore defensive end Joey Bosa, who started 10 games as a freshman last season. Inside, the Buckeyes have senior Michael Bennett and junior Adolphus Washington. Without question, this is Ohio State's best group of players.

As for the linebacking corps, it has an enormous void to fill after Ryan Shazier – who led the Big Ten with 143 tackles (101 solo) in 2013 – opted to leave early for the NFL. This group will be led in 2014 by senior middle linebacker Curtis Grant and junior weak-side 'backer Joshua Perry. These two combined for 116 tackles last season, or 27 less than Shazier had by himself.

The secondary was Ohio State's weak link in 2013 and its two bright spots from last season both left early for the NFL. The Buckeyes do bring back senior cornerback Doran Grant, but are looking at two new safeties in 2014. Along with the offensive line, this is the one area that gives pause.

On special teams, Ohio State brings back a pretty reliable punter in sophomore Cameron Johnston. His 44 yards per punt led all Big Ten punters last season. The Buckeyes will also have the aforementioned Wilson back returning kickoffs and punts. They will need to fill a void at kicker with Drew Basil gone.

As far as the schedule is concerned, this is the one reason why Ohio State has the best chance of any Big Ten team to make the College Football Playoff. Unlike Wisconsin and Michigan

State, the Buckeyes' marquee non-conference game happens to be at the Horseshoe when Virginia Tech visits Sept. 6.

October features a pair of road games at Maryland on Oct. 4 and Penn State on Oct. 25 and those just might be the two biggest obstacles in the way of Ohio State being undefeated when it visits Michigan State on Nov. 8. Last year, that was the Big Ten Championship Game and the Spartans prevailed. This year, that match-up will most likely decide the Big Ten East Division and it's at Spartan Stadium.

If the Buckeyes get their payback against Michigan State, there's no reason to think they can't find themselves back in the same scenario as a year ago where the Big Ten Championship Game in Indianapolis decides whether or not they'll advance. The question, however, is will Ohio State actually be able to do just that and given what both it and Michigan State present, there's reason to be skeptical of that.

This team should be every bit as good as the last two teams Meyer has coached. It's just difficult to envision the Buckeyes getting over that hump.

#### **AUDIO:**

Ohio State quarterback Braxton Miller –

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