

2014 Big Ten football previews: Purdue (premium)

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After previewing the Big Ten's East Division consisting of [Penn State](#), [Rutgers](#), [Michigan](#), [Ohio State](#), [Michigan State](#), [Indiana](#) and [Maryland](#), our first look at the West Division features the Purdue Boilermakers. Iowa makes its second consecutive trip to Ross-Ade Stadium in West Lafayette, Ind., on Sept. 27.

Not much was expected of Purdue in Darrell Hazell's first season. But as it turned out, the Boilermakers were even worse than anticipated. It began with a 41-7 loss in the opener at Cincinnati and avalanched into a 1-11 season where the lone win came against a 1-11 FCS opponent (Indiana State) by single digits. Now as Hazell enters his second year at the helm, Purdue still has a steep climb ahead of it, but should also be better in 2014.

The improvement starts at the quarterback position. The Boilermakers claim there's a QB battle going on for the starting spot between sophomores Danny Etling and Austin Appleby, but make no mistake. Etling will remain the starter when Purdue hosts Western Michigan on Aug. 30 after starting seven of the eight games he appeared in as a true freshman last season. His most recent outing stands out because even though the Boilermakers lost to in-state rival Indiana, Etling completed 33-of-49 pass attempts for 485 yards and four touchdowns. He should be in position to build off that performance.

At running back, Purdue has a pair of options that are both seniors. One is Akeem Hunt, who led the Boilermakers in

rushing last season with 464 yards rushing and one touchdown on 123 carries. The other is Raheem Mostert, who made the move to running back last year and helps give Purdue a 1-2 punch in the backfield. If the offense manages to improve, both players should be reasons why.

The good news for Purdue's offense is that its top seven leading receivers are all back in 2014. However, the top two receivers on the team last season were senior tight end Justin Sinz and Hunt. Sinz recorded team-highs of 41 receptions and four touchdowns and both he and Hunt tied for second on the team with 340 yards receiving. Sophomore wideout DeAngelo Yancey returns after leading Purdue with 546 yards receiving on 32 catches and two scores last year. Another name to watch with this group is junior receiver Danny Anthrop, who hauled in 17 catches for 313 yards receiving in 2013.

Up front, Purdue returns its three interior linemen from last season in junior center Robert Kugler and sophomore guards Jason King and Jordan Roos. Kugler started every game at center for the Boilermakers in 2013, while King became the starting left guard back in November and Roos started six of Purdue's last seven games at right guard. Sophomore J.J. Prince is being counted on to take over at right tackle, while left tackle will feature junior Corey Clements, who is listed at 6-8, 400 pounds.

Defensively, Purdue is changing things up in 2014 by moving to a 3-3-5 scheme. The leader of the defensive line is senior end Ryan Russell, who has started each of the previous three seasons and recorded 35 tackles and two sacks in 2013. Sophomore Ra'Zahn Howard is projected to take over nose tackle and the end spot opposite Russell features a competition between sophomore Jake Replogle and junior Michael Rouse III.

The linebacking corps features three seniors, two of which started games last season. But the interesting deal here is the two returning starters – Joe Gilliam and Sean Robinson –

are swapping spots. Robinson takes over the middle after starting nine games as an outside 'backer, while Gilliam is now at the weak-side spot after starting eight games at middle linebacker. Robinson comes off a 45-tackle year, while Gilliam recorded 31 tackles and three pass break ups in 2013.

This defense's strongest group is the secondary and that's despite Purdue losing a corner who was easily its best player last season in Ricardo Allen. The Boilermakers' top three returning tacklers are all defensive backs that return in 2014. A pair of juniors will control the corner spots in Anthony Brown (69 tackles) and Frankie Williams (61 tackles and two picks). Brown moves over to corner this year after previously playing at safety. Senior safety Taylor Richards recorded 64 tackles in 2013, but is competing for a starting spot with redshirt freshman Robert Gregory. Seniors Landon Feichter and Antoine Lewis are also listed as starters at safety and nickel back, respectively.

On special teams, junior Paul Griggs returns as the placekicker, but is coming off a difficult 2013 where he only connected on 6-of-12 field goal attempts. Junior Thomas Meadows handled kickoff duties last season and is now taking over for Cody Webster at punter. Williams will handle punt return duties again, while the backfield of Hunt and Mostert will continue handling kickoff returns.

Looking at Purdue's schedule, it should be able to go 3-1 in non-conference play. Beating Notre Dame on Sept. 13 in Indianapolis appears unlikely, but the Boilermakers' three home games against Western Michigan, Central Michigan and Southern Illinois are all winnable. Interestingly enough, its Big Ten opener at home against Iowa might be Purdue's key game. After playing the Hawkeyes, the Boilermakers also have to play Michigan State, Wisconsin and Northwestern at Ross-Ade Stadium and trips to Lincoln, Neb., and Bloomington, Ind., (for the second straight year) are also included.

If Purdue somehow managed to upset Iowa, finding two wins over the course of October and November seems easier to obtain than three wins over those final two months. Again, the Boilermakers probably aren't reaching bowl eligibility coming off a 1-11 campaign and finding just one win in Big Ten play might be hard to come by. But the schedule sets up for a better season in terms of wins and losses and Purdue's a program that under Hazell's guidance should continue improving over the next few seasons.

AUDIO:

Purdue defensive end Ryan Russell –

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