

2014 Big Ten football previews: Minnesota (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

After examining [Penn State](#), [Rutgers](#), [Michigan](#), [Ohio State](#), [Michigan State](#), [Indiana](#), [Maryland](#), [Purdue](#) and [Illinois](#), we now shift our attention to the Minnesota Golden Gophers. For the fourth time in the last five years, Iowa will visit TCF Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, Minn., on Nov. 8.

Coming off a 6-win season in 2012, the feeling at this time last year was Minnesota would take a step back. It easily could have when head coach Jerry Kill was forced to take a leave of absence following another epileptic episode. But instead, the Golden Gophers played inspired and put together a memorable 8-5 campaign in 2013. A shot at making a third straight bowl game in 2014 isn't unrealistic, but it could also prove more challenging.

At quarterback, Mitch Leidner returns for his sophomore season and with Philip Nelson out of the picture, the burden of leading this offense has been placed on Leidner, who started four of the 10 games he appeared in last year. When he was under center, Leidner was effective as a runner, compiling 407 yards rushing on 102 carries and tied for a team-high seven touchdowns on the ground. But it's his passing that needs the most improvement. Leidner only threw the ball 78 times in 2013 and completed 43 of those attempts for 619 yards and three touchdowns. These numbers should improve now that he's the guy, but they're going to need to improve for Minnesota to have any chance offensively.

The Golden Gophers' best offensive player is their running back, senior David Cobb. He led Minnesota in rushing last

season with 1,202 yards and seven touchdowns on 237 carries. He also had 17 catches for 174 yards receiving, good for third and fourth respectively on the team. He's the one player Minnesota can ill-afford to lose at any point this fall.

The receiving corps is a glaring question mark, especially when you tack on Leidner's lack of passing productivity a year ago. Sophomore tight end Maxx Williams returns after leading the Golden Gophers in receiving with 25 catches for 417 yards and five touchdowns (all team-highs). The two most experienced wideouts are senior Isaac Fruechte and sophomore Drew Wolitarsky. Fruechte had 13 catches for 154 yards receiving last season, while Wolitarsky had 15 grabs for 259 yards and a touchdown. This is also a group where younger players could potentially emerge and provide an immediate impact.

One thing Minnesota has going for it offensively is experience up front, as it brings back five O-linemen whom started games in 2013. The cogs of this line are senior left guard Zac Epping and junior right tackle Josh Champion, both of whom started every game last season. Senior center Tommy Olson and junior right guard Foster Bush both face similar predicaments having started the last four games of last season, yet competing for those same spots in 2014. Olson's currently battling junior Brian Bobek at center, while junior Jon Christenson is looking to unseat Bush at right guard. Sophomore Ben Lauer is on pace to start at left tackle, where he started four times in 2013.

Minnesota brings back seven starters on defense, including three defensive linemen. But that front four has an enormous void to fill this year after the Atlanta Falcons drafted Ra'Shede Hageman last spring. Junior Scott Ekpe faces the task of replacing Hageman inside. Meanwhile, junior Theiren Cockran is back at one D-end spot after leading the Golden Gophers with 7.5 sacks last season, while senior Michael Amaefula occupies the other end spot. Senior Cameron Botticelli returns at defensive tackle after recording 23 tackles in 2013.

At linebacker, senior Damien Wilson returns to the middle after recording 78 tackles playing that spot last year. But Wilson will have new faces alongside him in 2014. Junior linebacker De'Vondre Campbell started a game at Indiana in place of Wilson last season and is expected to take over at the weak-side spot. As for the strong-side vacancy, it looks as though sophomore Jack Lynn will emerge there.

Much like the defensive line, Minnesota's secondary brings back three starters from a season ago. But the one void at cornerback is enormous with Brock Vereen now playing for the Chicago Bears. Senior strong safety Cedric Thompson returns after leading the Golden Gophers with 79 tackles, two fumble recoveries and an interception. Junior Antonio Johnson started Minnesota's final seven games at free safety after Vereen moved over to corner and finished 2013 with 69 tackles and three pass break ups.

Junior Eric Murray started every game last season at corner and managed to not only record 52 tackles (44 unassisted), but also lead the Golden Gophers with 10 pass break ups. The other corner spot is a battle between junior Briean Boddy-Calhoun and senior Derrick Wells, both of whom started games at corner last season before Vereen switched positions.

Minnesota is still unsettled at kicker, but returns junior punter Peter Mortell after he averaged 43.3 yards per punt in 2013. Senior Marcus Jones will handle punt and kickoff return duties after returning one of each for touchdowns last season.

Now when it comes to the schedule, the Golden Gophers are going to want to rack up as many wins as possible before the month of November. Following a bye week that first November weekend, Minnesota concludes its regular season with a four-game stretch consisting of Iowa and Ohio State visiting TCF Bank Stadium, followed by consecutive road trips to Nebraska and Wisconsin.

The Golden Gophers have three key games before this stretch and will need to win at least one of them if they want to go bowling for a third straight year – Sept. 13 at TCU, Sept. 27 at Michigan (Minnesota's Big Ten opener) and Oct. 11 against Northwestern at home. Every other game in September and October is winnable. These three contests will make or break Minnesota's season because on one hand, they're all difficult contests, but on the other hand, these are games the Golden Gophers could realistically win if enough breaks go their way in any one of them.

There's no question Kill has this Minnesota program going in the right direction. But while this isn't a make or break season for the Golden Gophers, it's one that could set the tone for what lies ahead in their future.

AUDIO:

Minnesota quarterback Mitch Leidner –

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