

2014 Big Ten football previews: Northwestern (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

Thus far in our Big Ten season preview series, we have discussed [Penn State](#), [Rutgers](#), [Michigan](#), [Ohio State](#), [Michigan State](#), [Indiana](#), [Maryland](#), [Purdue](#), [Illinois](#) and [Minnesota](#). We now turn our attention to the Northwestern Wildcats. Iowa will play its second straight home game against Northwestern on Nov. 1 at Kinnick Stadium.

Last season started off well for Northwestern and at one point, there was potential for it being as special as 2012 turned out to be for the Wildcats. But then came that marquee game against Ohio State, a game Northwestern would lose, and Pat Fitzgerald's team never recovered. What began as promising became nightmarish and instead of competing for a Big Ten title, the Wildcats went 5-7 and missed out on a bowl game altogether.

This offseason has only provided more turmoil for this program between unionization becoming a hot topic and more recently, having running back Venric Mark transfer and wide receiver Christian Jones suffer a season-ending knee injury in fall camp. Yet despite all of that, Northwestern could still very well be a team that stays in the Big Ten West conversation this fall.

At quarterback is senior Trevor Siemian, who no longer has to worry about splitting first-string duties with Kain Colter any longer. This is his team and his offense now. Last season, Siemian appeared in all 12 of Northwestern's games and

finished with 2,149 yards passing, 11 touchdowns and nine interceptions. Obviously, his passing numbers need to improve. But since he's not nearly as mobile as Colter was, Siemian's arm has always been his best attribute and with more reps should come more productive numbers.

Now losing Mark at running back (and doing so two weeks before the season starts) is crushing, especially when considering how the Wildcats' offense was never the same last season after he got hurt. That being said, Treyvon Green did rush for a team-high 736 yards and eight touchdowns on 137 carries in 2013 and returns this fall looking to again fill that void left by Mark. Behind Green is sophomore Stephen Buckley, who rushed for 265 yards and a touchdown on 50 carries last season.

Watching Christian Jones go down to injury might be even more depleting for the Wildcats, especially they're going to need all the weapons they can get for Siemian this season. But Northwestern does have another Jones (no relation) to lead the receiving corps in Tony Jones, who caught a team-high of 55 receptions and had 630 receiving yards (only 38 fewer than Christian Jones had). Two other wideouts Northwestern will now need to step up are junior Cameron Dickson and senior Kyle Prater.

Another name to keep in mind when discussing the Wildcats' passing attack is junior super-back Dan Vitale. Only the two Joneses caught more balls last season than Vitale – who hauled in 34 catches – and he racked up 382 yards receiving and three touchdowns. His role only becomes more vital now for Northwestern's offense.

The most encouraging news for Siemian and the Wildcat offense is that the entire offensive line from last year is back. Seniors Jack Konopka and Paul Jorgensen both return at the two tackle spots, while senior Brandon Vitabile returns at center. Junior Matt Frazier started the last four games of 2013 at

right guard and remains first-string there now, while junior Geoff Mogus remains the starter at left guard. Sophomores Ian Park and Adam DePietro both started games last season and are competing at the two guard spots.

Tyler Scott was Northwestern's most productive defensive lineman last season, recording a team-high of six sacks. He's gone, but the rest of that D-line from a year ago remains intact. A foot injury hampered defensive tackle Sean McEvilly last fall, but he returns for his senior season now looking to boost the Wildcat defense. Also returning is junior defensive end Dean Lowry, who is coming off a season consisting of 33 tackles, 4.5 sacks, two forced fumbles and two interceptions. Joining these two guys along the front four will be juniors Deonte Gibson and C.J. Robbins.

Northwestern's linebacking corps loses its leading tackler from last season in Damien Proby. But it does return arguably the best linebacker in the Big Ten this season in senior weak-side 'backer Chi Chi Ariguzo. In addition to recording 106 tackles, Ariguzo also tied for a team-high four interceptions in 2013. Also returning is senior middle linebacker Collin Ellis, who comes off a season featuring 78 tackles and three interceptions, two of which were returned for pick-sixes in the same game against California.

The secondary returns all four starters from 2013. Senior safety Ibraheim Campbell and junior cornerback Nick VanHoose are the leaders of this group. Campbell had 73 tackles, five pass break ups and four interceptions, while VanHoose recorded 61 tackles and a team-high eight pass break ups. This group also returns junior safety Traevon Henry, who had 77 tackles last season. Sophomores Matt Harris and Dwight White both started games at corner in 2013, but Harris currently has the edge for that last spot.

On special teams, Northwestern has to replace Jeff Budzien at kicker, which it doesn't appear to have done just yet. Junior

Chris Gradone returns after handling 11 of Northwestern's punts last season. With Mark gone, Tony Jones and Harris are among the likely candidates to now handle punt and kickoff return duties for the Wildcats.

Northwestern has two intriguing non-conference games at home right away with California and Northern Illinois both visiting Ryan Field. The Wildcats also play at Notre Dame on Nov. 15. That being said, Northwestern has a six-game stretch in Big Ten play prior to the Notre Dame contest that will tell a lot. This stretch starts on Sept. 27 with a trip to Penn State, followed by a home date with Wisconsin, a road trip to Minnesota and a home game against Nebraska. Then following the bye week, Northwestern travels to Iowa on Nov. 1 and plays Michigan at home on Nov. 8.

Between the other six games, the Wildcats should be able to win at least 4 (if not 5) of those contests. With the exception of Penn State, Northwestern lost to all of those other Big Ten teams last season that it plays during that stretch and some of those defeats were snatched from victory. If the Wildcats are to have a bounce-back year, going at least .500 during those six weeks would be most ideal for them.

While it's hard to envision Northwestern being able to actually win the Big Ten West, there's enough senior leadership around to suggest a bounce-back season is still possible. The question now is whether or not the Wildcats can start catching some of these breaks they haven't been getting since last October.

AUDIO:

Northwestern safety Ibraheim Campbell –

<http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Ibraheim-Campbell-2014-BIG-Media-Days.mp3>