

# 2014 Big Ten football previews: Nebraska (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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We've written about [Penn State](#), [Rutgers](#), [Michigan](#), [Ohio State](#), [Michigan State](#), [Indiana](#), [Maryland](#), [Purdue](#), [Illinois](#), [Minnesota](#) and [Northwestern](#). Now we set our sights on the Nebraska Cornhuskers. Iowa will play Nebraska on Nov. 28 at Kinnick Stadium.

Last season, Nebraska possessed a team talented enough to win the Legends Division. It just never materialized in big games and as a result, the hot seat kept getting warmer and warmer for Bo Pelini. In fact, it looked like he was doing everything possible to get fired right after the Cornhuskers lost to Iowa at home by three touchdowns on Black Friday. But Pelini and Nebraska managed a small bit of salvaging on New Year's Day, defeating Georgia in the Gator Bowl.

Now entering 2014, the Cornhuskers again have plenty of talent at their disposal. In terms of athletic talent and ability, they might even be the best that the Big Ten's West Division has to offer. But can it all come together, or will this prove to be another disappointing season for the faithful in Lincoln?

As unfortunate as it was for Nebraska that it spent most of last season without having Taylor Martinez, the positive from that was Tommy Armstrong, Jr., gaining game experience at quarterback. Now Armstrong, Jr., enters his sophomore campaign as the guy. In nine appearances last season, he threw for a team-high 966 yards, but had a touchdown-to-interception ratio of 9-to-8. Needless to say, this has to improve in order for Armstrong, Jr., and Nebraska both to take that next step.

Meanwhile, Nebraska is set at the other skill positions. The Cornhuskers might very well have the conference's best 1-2 punch at running back this season between senior Ameer Abdullah and junior Imani Cross. Abdullah's 1,690 yards on the ground last season were the most by any Big Ten running back. He also rushed for nine touchdowns while toting the rock 281 times. Cross had 447 yards rushing on 85 carries, but led Nebraska with 10 rushing touchdowns. More of the same from these two guys should be expected.

The receiving corps took a huge hit with Quincy Enunwa now in the NFL. Enunwa had 51 catches for team-highs of 753 yards receiving and 12 touchdowns. Now the good news for the Cornhuskers is they do have a big-time receiver returning in senior Kenny Bell, who had 52 catches for 577 yards and four touchdowns in 2013. It should be noted only two of those touchdown catches came courtesy of Armstrong, Jr. Three other receivers that will likely play greater roles in 2014 are sophomore Jordan Westerkamp, junior Sam Burtch and senior Jamal Turner.

Up front, the offensive line is a major concern because senior left guard Jake Cotton is the only regular starter from last season that's back. Senior Mike Moudy is currently listed as the starter at right guard, a position he held for two games last season against Minnesota and Northwestern. Junior Alex Lewis is a Colorado transfer in line to start at left tackle this season. At center, there's still a competition between junior Ryne Reeves and senior Mark Pelini (Bo's nephew). Junior Zach Sterup is the favorite to start at right tackle.

Defensively, the strength of the Blackshirts this season will be the D-line, led by junior defensive end Randy Gregory. After transferring from Arizona Western Community College, Gregory burst onto the scene last season by compiling 66 tackles and leading the Big Ten with 10.5 sacks. Simply put, Gregory is the conference's best defensive player. Inside, the Cornhuskers have depth with junior Aaron Curry and sophomores

Vincent Valentine and Maliek Collins all gaining experience last season.

The back seven is where things start getting dicey with this defense. Sophomore linebacker Michael Rose was in line to start at middle linebacker, but was injured during fall camp and will miss all of the 2014 season. Rose also had 66 tackles for Nebraska last season. Without Rose, the Cornhuskers will become even more reliant on junior David Santos and senior Zaire Anderson. Santos recorded 87 tackles and two sacks in 2013, while Anderson had 52 tackles and three sacks.

Meanwhile, the secondary lost some key depth at safety during fall camp with junior Charles Jackson being injured for the entire 2014 season and sophomore LeRoy Alexander being suspended. The only returning starter is senior strong safety Corey Cooper, who led Nebraska with 91 tackles last season. The losses at corner of Cianté Evans and Stanley Jean-Baptiste – both had four interceptions each in 2013 – leaves the Cornhuskers vulnerable. Senior Josh Mitchell compiled 31 tackles, as well as six pass break ups and an interception last season, while junior Jonathan Rose will be seeing his first significant action this fall.

Sophomore Sam Foltz is back to handle Nebraska's punting after averaging 41.6 yards per punt in 2013. Meanwhile, junior Mauro Bondi is in line to handle placekicking, but whether he actually will or not remains unknown. Westerkamp will remain the Cornhuskers' punt returner, while Bell continues handling kickoff returns.

Now looking to Nebraska's schedule, there's no reason the Cornhuskers can't go 7-0 at Memorial Stadium this season. Their toughest home game might actually be on Sept. 20 when Miami (Fla.) visits Lincoln. The Big Ten slate features home games against Illinois, Rutgers, Purdue and Minnesota. Conversely, the road schedule is insane. For whatever reason, Nebraska is playing a non-conference game at Fresno State on

Sept. 13. Then its first road game in Big Ten play is Oct. 4 at Michigan State. The rest of the road slate includes trips to Northwestern, Wisconsin and Iowa.

This schedule (specifically the road portion) is honestly the lone trepidation. Nebraska is arguably more talented than Wisconsin or Iowa, but having to play both on the road in November is enough reason to not pick the Cornhuskers to win the West. That being said, keep an eye on that Michigan State game for this reason – even though Nebraska lost to Michigan State last season, it was one of the few teams able to move the ball at will on the Spartans' defense. Heck, the Cornhuskers even scored 28 points that afternoon. Five turnovers is the reason why they lost that game.

If they can stay clean with the football, they're one of the few teams that can actually hang with and even beat Michigan State. If Nebraska leaves East Lansing that night with a win, going into Evanston, Madison and Iowa City won't be nearly as intimidating.

#### **AUDIO:**

Nebraska running back Ameer Abdullah –

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