2014 Big Ten football previews: Wisconsin (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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We've discussed Penn State, Rutgers, Michigan, Ohio State, Michigan State, Indiana, Maryland, Purdue, Illinois, Minnesota, Northwestern and Nebraska. Now our attention shifts to the Wisconsin Badgers. Iowa will play its third straight home game dating back to 2010 against Wisconsin on Nov. 22 at Kinnick Stadium.

The Badgers went through a somewhat radical change in 2013 when Gary Andersen was brought to Wisconsin as head coach. Offensively, the changes weren't entirely noticeable because Andersen recognized his offense's strengths and maximized them. Defensively, the Badgers evolved into a 3-4 team and while there was an evident transition period going on, the defense provided results.

Going into 2014, Wisconsin has been tabbed the favorite to win the Big Ten West and in all honesty, that label is justified, perhaps even more so than some will let on.

Looking at the quarterback conundrum the Badgers are dealing with, no decision has been made yet whether junior Joel Stave will remain the starter or if junior Tanner McEvoy will unseat Stave. It seems pretty clear Stave will be under center when Wisconsin plays LSU in two weeks because if the plan was to go with McEvoy, wouldn't that have decision already been made? If it's this close, there's no reason for them to change.

Here's why this is even a discussion – Stave threw 13 interceptions last season to go along with his 22 touchdown passes. Obviously he needs to cut down on his turnovers, but

given the identity of Wisconsin's offense, that's all he really should be worrying about.

Sticking with this point on offensive identity, the Badgers want to run the ball. A lot. Yes, they lost James White. They also have the best running back in the Big Ten (and maybe even the entire country) in junior Melvin Gordon. Last season, Gordon rushed for 1,609 yards and 12 touchdowns on 206 carries. In fact, he averaged 123.8 yards per game rushing. The only two Big Ten running backs who averaged more yards per game both had more carries than Gordon, who was splitting time with another 100-yard back in White.

One thing that will be similar is Wisconsin will continue using a 1-2 punch with sophomore Corey Clement complementing Gordon. Clement had 547 yards rushing and seven touchdowns on 67 carries and this was playing behind Gordon and White. Both Gordon and Clement are going to get more carries and more yards. The Badgers' ground game will remain the same.

The biggest concern with this offense outside of the QB situation is at receiver, where Wisconsin has a lot of unproven players. Junior wideout Jordan Frederick is probably the veteran of the bunch, yet he only had 10 catches for 106 yards during the 2013 season. One name that should become a bigger part of the Badgers' passing attack is junior Kenzel Doe. Senior Sam Arneson will also be more involved playing at tight end.

Up front, Wisconsin's as tall and beefy as ever. It's also as experienced as ever. Senior Rob Havenstein (6-8, 333 pounds) might be the Big Ten's best right tackle. Junior Tyler Marz (6-5, 321 pounds) started every game at left tackle in 2013. Next to Havenstein is senior right guard Kyle Costigan (6-5, 319 pounds). Sophomore center Dan Voltz (6-3, 311 pounds) and senior left guard Dallas Lewallen (6-6, 321 pounds) make up the rest of the group paving the way for Gordon this fall.

Defensively, there has been concern expressed about the Badgers replacing their entire front seven. That's not something that can be diminished. However, all of these new starters along the D-line and in the linebacking corps have had a year to learn the 3-4 and understand the nuances of what they do.

On the D-line, the biggest loss is Beau Allen at the nose guard. Filling in at nose guard now is senior Warren Herring, who had only 17 tackles, but also recorded four sacks for the Badgers in 2013. As for the linebackers, two names to watch are seniors Marcus Trotter and Derek Landisch, who are both inside 'backers taking on the responsibility of replacing Chris Borland. Trotter had 23 tackles and a fumble recovery last season, while Landisch had 33 tackles, a sack and a fumble recovery. Point being, Wisconsin has guys that have played before.

The secondary, by default, is considered this defense's best attribute. Leading the DBs is junior strong safety Michael Caputo, who had 63 tackles for the Badgers last season. Holding down the two corner spots are junior Darius Hillary and sophomore Sojourn Shelton. Hillary recorded 30 tackles and five pass break ups in 2013, while Shelton had 36 tackles (31 unassisted) and team-highs of eight pass break ups and four interceptions. Teams that struggle running the ball against Wisconsin will struggle to win.

On special teams, junior Drew Meyer returns to handle punting duties, while placekicking duties will once again belong to junior kicker Jack Russell. Doe will be back handling both punt and kickoff returns again this fall.

Wisconsin gets a chance to make an immediate statement on Aug. 30 when it travels to Houston to face LSU. That evening, the Badgers will be an underdog. After that evening though, there's a good chance Wisconsin wins each of its next nine games leading up to Nov. 22 when it visits Iowa. The two

hurdles between those LSU and Iowa games are Oct. 4 at Northwestern and Nov. 15 when Nebraska visits Camp Randall Stadium.

If the Badgers somehow manage to escape NRG Stadium with a victory over LSU, not only will everyone become convinced that Wisconsin's the team to beat in the West, but all of a sudden, Gordon will start gaining more steam for the Heisman Trophy and the Badgers will start gaining more steam for the College Football Playoff should they meet expectations post-LSU.

Wisconsin has a nice enough schedule in place that as far as winning the West goes, it can afford a hiccup or even two since its crossovers from the East are Maryland at home and then at Rutgers the following week. There's definitely concerns, but the things to like about this team supersede those concerns because the Badgers have won this way before with a powerful O-line and excellent ground game and as long as those two things are established, they're always going to be a contender.

AUDIO:

Wisconsin running back Melvin Gordon –

http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Melvin-Gordon-2014-B1G-Media-Days.mp3