

## Preview: Big Ten Football 2007

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College football is BACK bay-bee!!! A full slate tomorrow, including the Buckeyes hosting Youngstown State. It's time to lock the doors, shut off the cell phone, bribe the wife, and order delivery. And lock down for 12 hours of college football. This morning, Furls checks in with his Big Ten Preview. Michigan and Wisconsin are the favorites. Iowa, Purdue, and Illinois are the sexy sleepers. Where does that leave the Buckeyes? Furls tells us.



It was not too long ago that folks thought of the Big Ten as the “Big Two and Little Eight” (referring to Ohio State and Michigan’s dominance of the conference). This year, on the surface, the Big Ten appears to be a lot different as parity abounds. Folks in the national media think that the Big Ten is going to rebound mightily from a down year last year, but I see it a little different.

While it is true that this year there are a lot of teams that should be able to compete for the conference crown, I do not see any complete teams in the conference. They are all plagued by at least one critical fault, a fault that would preclude them from contention in most years. It is even more interesting to note that because of favorable scheduling none of these teams will really be exposed.

Right now the media seems to like Wisconsin or Michigan and those are good safe picks, but they are not without the problems. Ohio State has become a popular “if everything falls into place” pick and Iowa has become a favorite sleeper among insiders. I think it is way to early to say anything to decisive, but hell, that

never stopped me before.

Lets start with the soft underbelly of the Big Ten:

**11. Northwestern:** Well at least they play close to Chicago so they should be able to get some pretty good pizza. That is about the only nice thing I can say about that program right now. While it is true that the Wildcats are returning 16 starters from last year's roster, I am not sure that this is such a good thing given how they played last year. This will be Pat Fitzgerald's first full year as head coach, including a camp, so it will be interesting to see what kind of changes he can institute, but in the end, the only thing that will prevent Northwestern from totally showing their asses this year is the fact that Wisconsin and Penn State are off the schedule. I am only writing about Minnesota because Swerb said I had give everyone a trophy.

**10. Minnesota:** Yuck. This team was miserable last year and will be miserable again this year. Saying their defense is porous is an insult to colanders and sponges around the world. The Gophers fired Glen Mason after blowing their bowl game. It is pretty obvious that he did not do a great job at Minnesota, but I am not sure that firing him was the right move because at least the team got to a bowl game. It still shocks me to this day that Mason was actually in the running for the Ohio State job in 2002. His replacement, Brewster, has his work cut out for him taking over a team that is devoid of any defensive talent.

**9. Michigan State:** Well at least John L. Cooper (I mean Smith) is gone. What he did to that program is a travesty. I am not an MSU fan, but a strong MSU program is good for the Big Ten as a whole, and I think that Mark D'Antonio is a step in the right direction. Unfortunately for Spartan fans the effect will not be immediate. The Spartans probably have the most brutal road schedule in the Big Ten, playing at Wisconsin, at Ohio State, at Purdue, and at Iowa. The Spartans, without Drew Stanton, will be starting a new quarterback for the first time since 2004. It is going to be a tough job for Hoyer, but it should get a little better as D'Antonio's defense gels. The short-term diagnosis for the ailing Spartans is not good, but the long-term prognosis is excellent.

**8.□ Indiana:** What a tragedy. It finally looked like Indiana had a football coach that was determined to stick with the program and bring it out of the Big Ten cellar, and they really were improving. Terry Hooppner's death this off-season is a stunning blow to a team full of kids who believed in him and a program that finally had something to believe in. Former offensive coordinator and new head coach, Bill Lynch will have his hands full replacing this highly regarded man. He does have some talent returning to the roster in Kellen Lewis and Marcus Thigpen, but it is hard to imagine the Hoosiers being able to bounce back from this blow any time soon, I hope for Terry's sake they "play thirteen," this year.

**7.□ Illinois:** The Illini took the Buckeyes to the limit in Champagne-Urbana last year, and given Ron Zook's masterful recruiting, there is a lot of talk swirling around this Illinois team. I'm not buying it. Zook is a great recruiter, but he is a lousy coach. I have no idea how he developed a good reputation as a coach, or even more astonishingly retained it in spite of the copious evidence to the contrary. My prediction, Illinois is going to be the most talented team in the Big Ten with a losing conference record and they will hold that distinction until Ron Zook is run out of town. The defense is going to be good, and there is talent on the offense, but neither side of the ball will play consistently or coherently, hallmarks of Ron Zook teams. Folks meet John L. Smith's replacement as the worst coach in the Big Ten.

Now that we have dispensed with the patsies, we can focus on the second tier Big Ten teams this year in a bit more detail. It is really hard to figure where these guys are going to finish in the end, so I am going to rank them all the same and as if they were stocks, put in buy, sell, and hold orders.

**6.□ Iowa:** Hold. Don't hold them because they are good, or because they are going to surprise anyone, hold them because they are not going to play anyone this year. Now that hold order does come with a caveat, sell them before they get destroyed in a bowl game that they do not deserve to be in. Although I think they are about the sixth best team in the Big Ten, I think they are ultimately going to finish 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> in the conference, by virtue of not having to play Michigan or Ohio State. The Hawkeyes do have

difficult road games at Wisconsin, Purdue, and Penn State, but if they can win one of them then they should be able to finish 10-2 or 9-3. The pundits will rally around their sexy record and the Hawkeyes will find themselves hopelessly overmatched in a bowl game (think Notre Dame).

Kirk Ferentz is everyone's favorite college name to mention in regards to NFL head coaching vacancies, but he has not been exceptionally effective in the NCAA. Drew Tate is gone, he was a gritty player, but he made a lot of bone headed plays trying to make plays when he should've thrown it away. His loss may be a mixed blessing for the Hawkeyes.

In summation, I really don't see much to be excited about (an average defense and an even more average offense) except for a schedule that sets the Hawkeyes up for an inflated record.

**5. Purdue:** Buy. This team is pretty good, in fact they are much better than most people think. Curtis Painter is the best quarterback in the Big Ten and and Joe Tiller is grossly underrated as a coach. The Boilermakers are a bit below average on the defensive side of the ball, but they should be able to make up for it on the offensive side of the ball.

Most people do not realize that Purdue has averaged nearly 28 points per game over the last 6 seasons. Think about it, that is an astonishing number. Unfortunately, they have given up an average of 21 points per

game over the same span. This year is going to be more of the same, but you have to like Joe Tiller with a veteran quarterback.

**4. Penn St: Sell.** Why is Penn St. one of the media darlings this year? It escapes me completely. I see an ordinary offense that lost its best player, Tony Hunt, to the NFL. I see a veteran quarterback, protected by a below average offensive line, who has been inconsistent (good numbers, but erratic play) and average wide receivers.

Penn State's losses on the offensive line were so substantial last year, three starters and five second and third stringers, that they brought in a couple of junior college players. Penn State never brings in JUCO's, so that should tell you something. Penn St. is generally offensively impaired to begin with so this just amplifies the problem. Fortunately you still have time to sell your stock in Penn St.; they should not be completely exposed until October 27<sup>th</sup> when they pick up their fourth loss.

This leaves us the top of the heap, A1... etc. All of these teams have their faults, but they all have their virtues too. It is up to the coaches to determine how these teams sort themselves out, but I will not shy away from making some predictions

**3. Wisconsin:** The Badgers return most of a decent defense from last year and a good running back. That is a pretty good start. Add some speed on the outside and it looks like we are getting somewhere. Now if we just had a guy to take the snap.

There has been much ado about Ohio State's quarterback controversy, but has anyone else noticed that John Stocco is no longer playing at Wisconsin? Don't get me wrong, I think Tyler Donovan will be a pretty serviceable replacement, but he is still an untested commodity. Donovan does not have Stocco's arm, but he is a big accurate passer and should step in and do a capable job.

Wisconsin has ridden an impressive record from 2006 into a terrific preseason 2007 ranking but in the end, it rings a bit hollow. Wisconsin really did not play anyone last year except Michigan and Arkansas. They were soundly beaten by the Wolverines and were beaten by the Razorbacks in every category except the one that counts, score.

The Razorbacks held P.J. Hill and the highly touted Wisconsin running attack to -5 yards on 28 carries. Michigan held them to 12 yards on 27 carries. Wisconsin averaged 3.9 yards per carry

last year, but they did most of their damage against horrid teams (Minnesota, Northwestern, and San Diego St.). I am unimpressed, and I am not sold.

**2. Michigan:** The Wolverines are going to disappoint all those ready to hand them the conference. Let's start with the virtues. They have the best set of skill players in the conference on the offensive side of the ball. No doubt about it. There is no team in the conference that can compete with the combination of Hart, Manningham/Arrington, and Chad Henne. Personally, I don't think Henne deserves a lot of the hype that he gets, but he is still a good quarterback.

The line will be solid and most college teams struggle with Michigan's zone blocking scheme upfront. Coincidentally, Mike Hart has the exceptional field vision required to run behind zone blocking. No one in the conference sees the seams better or hits the holes with better timing than Hart.

Now it is time for the tragic flaws.

1. Let's start with a popular misconception, USC did not blow Michigan off the field in that Rose Bowl, Lloyd Carr's lack of adjustments and Pete Carroll's adjustments removed them from the game. Folks meet the John Cooper of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. He is a pretty good recruiter, but recruiting is falling off a bit as a result of Michigan's diminishing in conference status. Yes, they are still getting some recruits, but they are losing a lot more of those big recruiting battles. Carr can win you ten games per year, hell twelve some years, he just won't win you any big games.

2. On the field, the defense. I am really surprised that Michigan's defense, which lost seven starters, is getting a pass by the media. SEVEN starters, every serious playmaker from last year's defense (Hall, Woodley, and Branch) has moved on. Michigan's offense, had better be REALLY good.

And that brings us to our champion (gearing up for a 5<sup>th</sup> BCS bowl in 6 years).

**1. Ohio State:** This is going to be the year that will be crowned as Jim Tressel's masterpiece, the year that it will appear as though he took his little team that could all the way to a Big Ten title. I am not convinced that he will do it in an undefeated season, but I think he will win this conference again.

I am not exactly buying the "this little team that could" thing. This team is much better than people believe, the biggest opposition to Ohio State in the polls right now is carryover from their last game.

In the end, I believe that the Buckeyes are the least screwed up team in a weak Big Ten this year. Michigan's defense is porous, Wisconsin's offense is suspect (defense isn't much better), Penn St. is constipated offensively and defensively. I just don't see a team that is as solid on both sides of the ball.

The schedule is favorable in that the offense will have to time to adjust before being challenged, and they return most of a very good offensive line. Even if Todd Boeckman proves to be a journeyman game manager, the offensive line and running game should be enough to sustain this team with the help from a very good defense. We all know that Jim Tressel knows how to win close games, let's just hope he doesn't keep any closer than they have to be.