

HERE COME THE BUCKEYES

2016 Ohio State Football Preview



OSU reloading or rebuilding?

Ohio State has 16 first-time starters this season and no one knows exactly how that will turn out

FIVE REASONS OHIO STATE COULD SURPRISE

1. J.T. Barrett.

When Barrett replaced the injured Braxton Miller in 2014 he became the best quarterback in the Big Ten and one of the best in the country before he was injured in the Michigan game.

After losing the starting job to Cardale Jones last season, he returned to the lineup and looked like the J.T. of 2014.

With the lessons he learned last fall, Barrett could be even better than he was in 2014.

2. Time is on its side.

The schedule could give Ohio State's 16 first-year starters time to grow.

Playing at Oklahoma on Sept. 17 could be the toughest game on the schedule. But by the time the Buckeyes get to games against Michigan State on Nov. 19 and Michigan on Nov. 26 the new guys will have almost a full season of experience as starters.

3. Urban Meyer.

Simply one of the best. Gives off a vibe he's smartest



Jim Naveau
Staff
Writer

guy in the room, coolest guy in the room. And he's 50-4 at Ohio State.

4. Ohio State has become a destination school.

OSU's roster is filled with four-star and five-star recruits and more are on the way.

And it's not just the best players who want to come to Columbus. Meyer added two new assistant coaches this year – co-defensive coordinator Greg

Schiano, a former NFL and Rutgers head coach, and highly regarded offensive line coach Greg Studrawa.

5. Right people. Right roles.

With the hiring of Studrawa, Ed Warinner will be a full-time offensive coordinator instead of holding that role and coaching the offensive line. Judging by the Michigan game and the Fiesta Bowl, having Warinner focused more on being the offensive coordinator is a good thing.

OHIO STATE SCHEDULE

Sept. 3 — Bowling Green, noon
Sept. 10 — Tulsa, 3:30 p.m.
Sept. 17 — at Oklahoma, 7:30 p.m.
Oct. 1 — Rutgers, noon
Oct. 8 — Indiana, TBA
Oct. 15 — at Wisconsin, 8 p.m.
Oct. 22 — at Penn State, 8 p.m.
Oct. 29 — Northwestern, 5:30 p.m.
Nov. 5 — Nebraska, 8 p.m.
Nov. 12 — at Maryland, TBA
Nov. 19 — at Michigan State, TBA
Nov. 26 — Michigan, TBA

AP PRESEASON TOP 25

1. Alabama
2. Clemson
3. Oklahoma
4. Florida State
5. LSU
6. Ohio State
7. Michigan
8. Stanford
9. Tennessee
10. Notre Dame
11. Mississippi
12. Michigan State
13. TCU
14. Washington
15. Houston
16. UCLA
17. Iowa
18. Georgia
19. Louisville
20. USC
21. Oklahoma State
22. North Carolina
23. Baylor
24. Oregon
25. Florida

FIVE REASONS OHIO STATE COULD DISAPPOINT

1. The experts could be wrong.

Not every four-star and five-star recruit lives up to his reputation. A lot of players who will start have not proved themselves on the field.

2. Injuries.

Maybe Ohio State has replacements for the 16 players who left after last year.

But it's a bigger leap of faith to believe it has backups at all those positions who are equally ready to be starters this year. Got to keep the starters healthy, especially at quarterback.

3. The schedule

Ohio State has to play at Oklahoma, at Penn State, at Wisconsin and at Michigan

State.

The Sooners and Spartans will be very good. Trips to Penn State and Wisconsin should be less challenging but Beaver Stadium and Camp Randall Stadium are tough places to play any year.

4. No Zeke means defenses can concentrate on J.T.

It's possible the threat of

Ezekiel Elliott running the ball made quarterback J.T. Barrett more effective and that defenses will be able to focus on him more this season.

5. Something no one is thinking about.

A lot of Ohio State fans underestimated Michigan State and didn't see that loss coming last season.



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OSU veterans are mentors

By Jim Naveau

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COLUMBUS — With 16 first-time starters and more than 40 players on its roster who have never played in a college game, Ohio State might be the most inexperienced big-time college football team in the country.

That hasn't deterred many of the people making preseason forecasts from putting the Buckeyes in their top 10 or even their top five.

Ohio State has talent. Ohio State has a lot of potential, the experts say.

But OSU coach Urban Meyer isn't a big fan of potential. "It's kind of a neat word for six months. But after six months if you say a guy has potential it's another way of saying he's not very good or he doesn't care," he said earlier this year.

So, will big expectations and big games bring out the best in Ohio State's young players or will the pressure from those things cause them problems this season?

If Ohio State's six returning starters have anything to say about it, the inexperienced guys will be ready to go.

Quarterback J.T. Barrett said he and the other veterans will emphasize "that it's your job to make sure you come to play."

"I'm trying to help the younger guys, get them to understand how we play here at Ohio State and make sure they understand we're not going to have rebuilding years. The expectations are

not going to change because you don't have experience," he said.

"The talent is still there, it's more the experience that's lacking. The confidence might be there when we're out there running drills at 4 o'clock on a Monday afternoon. But being able to get the confidence for those guys to know they can go out there and know they can make a play on a Saturday afternoon, I think that's something that needs to be developed," Barrett said.

Pat Elflein, a starter at guard last season who has moved over to center, said, "Guys who have been in the battle and in the storm are pretty confident. Now we just need to get that to the young guys and get their confidence up. They haven't really been out there and they don't really know what to expect and we do."

Meyer pointed to running back Mike Weber as someone who has moved from the potential category to someone who is ready to play.

Asked how much Weber needed to mature and how much he has matured, Meyer said, "A lot and a lot."

Linebacker Raekwon McMillan, in his second year as a starter, said, "Failure isn't an option. When they (young players) come in they already know the expectations and the urgency.

"With a young team you have to get down to the basics. You have to make sure they have their basics down. You have to have a solid foundation," he said.



DON SPECK/The Lima News
Sophomore wide receiver Terry McLaurin (83) makes a catch during Ohio State's spring game. He is one of many young players hoping to break into the lineup at OSU this season.

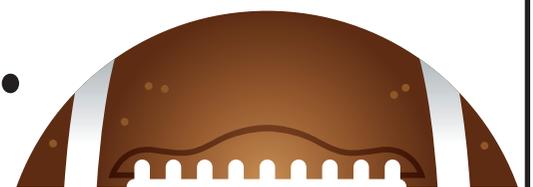
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DON SPECK/The Lima News
J.T. Barrett runs with the ball during Ohio State's game against Northern Illinois last season in Ohio Stadium.

Offense needs some playmakers

By Jim Naveau
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COLUMBUS – There is a difference in Ohio State's offense this year.

But that difference has nothing to do with new formations, new strategies or players wearing different numbers than a year ago.

The big difference is that after having several proven playmakers the last few seasons, this year OSU has several potential playmakers to go with its only proven playmaker, quarterback J.T. Barrett.

When in doubt, hand the football to Ezekiel Elliott is no longer an option for the Buckeyes to choose when they need a few yards or a big play.

And Michael Thomas' incredible catches will come in a New

Orleans Saints uniform this year, not in scarlet and gray.

Elliott was a first-round draft choice, as was offensive tackle Taylor Decker. Thomas was selected in the second round and wide receiver Braxton Miller and tight end Nick Vannett were also drafted.

Big things are expected from Barrett now that the quarterback job is his alone after an unsuccessful time share with Cardale Jones last fall.

Two years ago as a redshirt freshman Barrett threw for 2,834 yards and an Ohio State-record 34 touchdowns before a broken ankle in the Michigan game ended his season. Last year he began the year as Cardale Jones' back-up and never really hit his stride until the Michigan game and the Fiesta Bowl game against Notre Dame.

If Barrett is going to recreate his 2014 season or come close to it, he will need some help from the players around him on offense.

Who will provide that assistance is one of the biggest questions in Ohio State football this season.

Redshirt freshman Mike Weber is the apparent leader to take over at running back for Elliott.

Weber – the subject of a hot recruiting battle between OSU and Michigan – showed flashes of being a playmaker in the spring game. But replacing Elliott, who rushed for 1,821 yards last season and 1,878 yards in the national championship season in 2014, won't be easy.

Curtis Samuel, who spent most of last season at wide receiver, also could be a factor in the backfield.

Receiver Noah Brown, who

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missed last season because of a broken leg, has drawn some comparisons to Thomas. Some people say he could have been close to as good as Thomas if he had played last season. Corey Smith, who got a medical redshirt after a broken leg ended his season in 2015, caught five passes in five games last year.

Young receivers like Parris Campbell and Austin Mack and others could have chances to play. And players like Dontre Wilson and Johnnie Dixon, who were highly hyped when they arrived at Ohio State but have not lived up to their reputations yet, could turn out to be playmakers.

Three years ago Braxton Miller called Wilson "that bolt of lightning" and said he needed to be a starter as a freshman. But Wilson, who played in only four games last season, has never rushed for more than 300 yards in a season, never caught more than 22 passes in a season and has scored only seven touchdowns in his career.

At this year's OSU media day, Wilson said he felt like he hasn't done anything in his injury-marred career but that he thinks he can still change that in his senior season.

Pat Elflein, who has moved to center this season, and guard Billy Price give OSU two veteran offensive linemen. They are the only returning starters on offense other than Barrett.

First-year starters Jamarco Jones and Isaiah Prince appear to have claimed the tackle spots and a freshman, Michael Jordan, could start at the other guard.



At left, Ohio State running back Curtis Samuel loses his footing as he makes a cut in a game against Hawaii last season.



Running back Mike Weber takes a handoff from quarterback J.T. Barrett during Ohio State's spring football game.



Of the 16 starters Ohio State has to replace this season, Ezekiel Elliott (15) will be one of the hardest to replace. He rushed for more than 1,800 yards each of the last two seasons.



Ohio State coach Urban Meyer gives the players some encouragement before a game against Minnesota last year.

Photos by DON SPECK/The Lima News



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AP Photo

Raekwon Mc Millan (5) returns for a second season as one of the pillars of Ohio State's defense this season. The Buckeyes' middle linebacker was second-team All-Big Ten.

OSU defense aims high again

By Jim Naveau
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COLUMBUS – Losing eight starters off a defense would be a little daunting for any football team.

But to have to replace eight defensive starters the caliber of the eight Ohio State must replace this season is another level of intimidating.

Except that Ohio State isn't worried about it. At least not publicly.

Defensive co-coordinator Luke Fickell talked about a standard being set at Ohio State that players were expected to strive to reach after a recent practice. Linebacker Chis Worley echoed that sentiment and talked about a bar being set and not lowered.

Seven of the 12 Ohio State

players selected in this year's NFL draft were defensive players.

Three of them – Joey Bosa (San Diego), cornerback Eli Apple (New York Giants) and linebacker Darron Lee (New York Jets) were taken in the first round. Safety Vonn Bell (New Orleans Saints) was picked in the second round. Defensive tackle Adolphus Washington (Buffalo) was a third-rounder and linebacker Joshua Perry (San Diego) was chosen in the fourth round.

Led by those players, Ohio State ranked second nationally in scoring defense (15.1 points a game) and ninth in overall defense (311.3 yards a game).

So, the bar has been set at an elite level. Whether OSU can

reach that elite level defensively will play out on the field over the next few months and could be a major factor in what kind of season the Buckeyes have.

Three starters and another player who was a significant part of last year's defense are back.

Defensive end Tyquan Lewis emerged as a star last season when he had eight sacks and 14 tackles for losses despite a season-long shoulder injury. The other end, Sam Hubbard, rotated in as a sub for Lewis or Bosa and had 6.5 sacks in a part-time role.

Middle linebacker Raekwon McMillan, a second-team All-Big selection, and cornerback Gareon Conley, an honorable mention All-Big Ten choice, are the other returning defensive starters.

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Conley is the only returning starter in the defensive backfield after Apple, Bell and Tyvis Powell left early to go to the NFL.

The rest of the defensive backfield will be athletic, fast and inexperienced.

Conley has been described as an NFL-type cornerback by coach Urban Meyer and Hooker, a safety who had two interceptions in the spring game, might be one of the best athletes on a very athletic team.

Hooker did not play football until his junior year of high school because he was a stand-out at basketball. Damon Webb and Cam Burrows are battling for the other safety spot and Marshon Lattimore and Denzel Ward are competing for the other cornerback position.

Dante Booker is the probable starter at the other linebacker position and Michael Hill and Tracy Sprinkle are probably in the lead to start the opener against Bowling Green on Sept. 3 at the interior defensive line positions.

While OSU is deep at defensive end with Jalyn Holmes and Nick Bosa in the backup roles currently, the interior line positions are a question mark.

Davon Hamilton or Dre'mont Jones could go around the starters at those positions, which Meyer says he is concerned about.

"I'm not comfortable yet with our interior defensive line," he said.



At left, Gareon Conley (8) and Darron Lee (43) wrap up Michigan State running back L.J. Scott (3) during a game last season in Ohio Stadium.

DON SPECK/The Lima News



Ohio State defensive end Tyquan Lewis (59) makes a tackle on Minnesota's Rodney Smith (24) during a game last season at Ohio Stadium.

DON SPECK/The Lima News

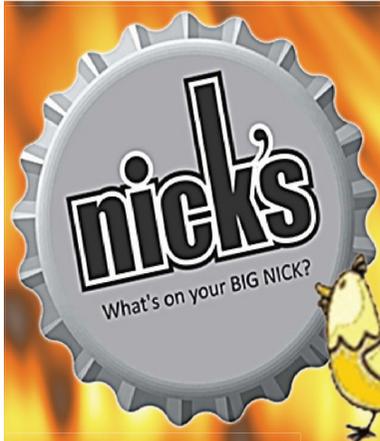
Ohio State charges on to the field before a game against Maryland at Ohio Stadium last season.

DON SPECK/The Lima News



DON SPECK/The Lima News

Brutus Buckeye did not leave early for the NFL draft and will be ready for another season, starting on Saturday against Bowling Green.



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It's J.T. all the way this year for OSU



AP Photo
Ohio State quarterback J.T. Barrett passes during the second half of the Buckeyes game against Michigan last season. Barrett is the undisputed starting QB for OSU this season.

By Jim Naveau

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COLUMBUS — On the day that Ohio State began preseason training camp in early August, quarterback J.T. Barrett said something that he knew would surprise a lot of people.

A year ago, he lost his starting quarterback job to Cardale Jones in preseason camp and didn't get it back until the second half of the Buckeyes' season.

With Jones gone to NFL, trying to earn a spot on the Buffalo Bills roster, it would have come as no shock to many people to hear Barrett say he was glad to be the undisputed starter this season and that he didn't miss Jones even a little bit.

Instead, he did just the opposite and talked about how he missed Jones and said that they still talk regularly.

Barrett said he wished Jones was still around to add some humor to the quarterback meetings by "saying something crazy." And then he turned a little more serious.

"He's just one of the people I knew had my back," Barrett said. "I think when you compete against somebody it's almost like people think you don't like them. But it wasn't like that with me and Cardale. We helped each

other out.

"It was hard for some people to realize that. They would say, 'Are you and Cardale friends?' and I would say, 'Yes,'" Barrett said.

In 2014, Barrett went from unknown quantity back-up to being the best quarterback in the Big Ten in the span of 12 games when he became Ohio State's starter after Braxton Miller's season-ending shoulder injury. He completed 64 percent of his passes for 2,834 yards and a school season-record 34 touchdown passes.

He was among the top five or six candidates for the Heisman Trophy going into the final game of the regular season against Michigan.

But when Barrett suffered a broken ankle in the second half of the Michigan game, Jones became the starter and passed for 257 yards against Wisconsin in the Big Ten championship game, 243 yards against Alabama in the Sugar Bowl and 242 yards against Oregon when OSU won the College Football Playoff national championship.

That set up a quarterback competition no one could have envisioned when Barrett went down with his injury.

Jones came out on top in that competition to the surprise of many people. But Barrett said he wasn't among the surprised. And he

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says his ankle was not an excuse.

"I was healthy. That wasn't an issue. I was thinking too much. I think it slowed my play down. I like playing fast. I wasn't doing that. I was trying to break down every situation," he said.

"I would say I had nobody to blame but myself. Cardale played better than me. I wasn't playing the way I can play. I was definitely doing some bad thinking at the start of last year."

Jones was inconsistent early last season and Barrett finally won his job back by rushing for two touchdowns and throwing for two in a 38-10 win over Penn State in mid-October.

OSU coach Urban Meyer said, "He was not himself during training camp last year. He didn't go through spring practice. He was battling a quarterback who won three games and a national championship. It was not his team. But he's ready to go this year.

"It was very close but he didn't take it. He just was not playing at the level he wanted himself to be on and I expected him to be at. It was hard because he wasn't getting all the reps (practice repetitions)," he said.

Barrett said his goal is to be even better than he was in 2014. "You're judged by your past but you don't want to hang your hat on it," he said.



Ohio State's J.T. Barrett (16) and Adolphus Washington (92) celebrate with fans after last year's 42-13 win over Michigan in Ann Arbor.

DON SPECK/The Lima News



Ohio State quarterback J.T. Barrett (16) heads up the field against Michigan while Jabrill Peppers (5) is knocked off his feet during last year's Ohio State-Michigan game.

DON SPECK/The Lima News



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BIG TEN EAST DIVISION

INDIANA

Last year: 6-7, 2-6 Big Ten, fifth in East
Returning starters: 14 (6 offense, 7 defense, kicker)

Players to watch: RB Devine Redding, WR Simmie Cobbs, WR Ricky Jones, OL Dan Feeney, LB Marcus Oliver

The big questions: Who will replace quarterback Nate Sudfeld, who threw for 3,573 yards and 27 touchdowns last season? Will

running back Devine Redding emerge as one of the Big Ten's top rushers after gaining 1,012 yards a year ago as the Hoosier's No. 2 tailback? Will IU finally figure out how to fix its defense?

Coach's quote: "We've got a good core of guys back. We have four fifth-year seniors in our offensive line. That's a very, very good group led by one of the best players in the conference, Dan Feeney." – Kevin Wilson

MARYLAND

Last year: 3-9, 1-7 Big Ten, tie for sixth in East
Returning starters: 11 (six offense, five defense)

Players to watch: QB Perry Hills, QB Caleb Rowe, WR Lavern Jacobs, CB Will Likely

The big questions: Can new coach D.J. Durkin translate working for Urban Meyer and Jim Harbaugh as an assistant coach into success with a Maryland program that has looked

overmatched in its first two seasons in the Big Ten? Can Durkin win more of the recruiting battles close to home in an area where other recruiters, including Meyer, have had great success in lately? Who plays quarterback?

Coach's quote: "Recruiting has obviously been our priority. We're putting a lot of time and effort into that." – D.J. Durkin

OHIO STATE

Last year: 12-1, 7-1 Big Ten, second in East
Returning starters: 8 (three offense, three defense, kicker, punter)

Players to watch: QB J.T. Barrett, RB Mike Weber, RB Curtis Samuel, WR Noah Brown, DE Tyquan Lewis, LB Raekwon McMillan, CB Gareon Conley

The big questions: Can Ohio State compete for the East Division championship and get to the Big Ten championship game with 16 first-

year starters? Will all those lofty recruiting rankings translate into production on the field? Is Mike Weber the next Ezekiel Elliott? Will Noah Brown emerge as the No. 1 receiver? Will J.T. Barrett stay healthy?

Coach's quote: "It's a very young team, but talented. This (August) is probably the most critical coaching month that I've ever been through." – Urban Meyer.

MICHIGAN

Last year: 10-3, 6-2 Big Ten, third in East

Returning starters: 15 (Eight offense, six defense, kicker)

Players to watch: WR Jehu Chesson, TE Jake Butt, WR Amara Darboh, RB De'Veon Smith, DE Chris Wormley, LB Jabrill Peppers, CB Jourdan Lewis

The big questions:

Who will replace Jake Ruddock (3,017 yards, 20 TDs) at quarterback

– Houston transfer John O'Korn or Wilton Speight? Will the offensive line, with four returning starters, improve enough for Michigan to challenge Ohio State and Michigan State, who have won a combined 19 of their last 22 games against the Wolverines? Will road games at MSU, Iowa and OSU tell the story of the season?

Coach's quote: We have big hopes. We've got big dreams. We've got lofty goals. And all those are achievable." – Jim Harbaugh



AP Photo
Michigan safety/linebacker Jabrill Peppers is expected to be an impact player on the Wolverines' defense this season.

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MICHIGAN STATE

Last year: 12-2, 7-1 Big Ten, Conference champion

Returning starters: 12 (four offense, six defense, kicker, punter)

Players to watch: QB Tyler O'Connor, RB L.J. Scott, TE Josiah Price, WR Donnie Corley, DT Malik McDowell, LB Riley Bullough

The big questions: Will Tyler O'Connor have a big year in his first year as MSU's starting quarterback? Who will be the go-to receiver with Aaron Burbridge gone? Is having only one starter returning on the offensive line a concern? Is linebacker Ed Davis healthy again?

Coach's quote: "We lose good players every year, just like every other program. But it seems that when the time comes, as a senior, you have to play your best football and our seniors have their best years. Our guys expect to win." – Mark Dantonio



AP Photo

Michigan State coach Mark Dantonio, starting his tenth season in East Lansing, has built the Spartans into a program that is annually a Big Ten contender and in the rankings.

PENN STATE

Last year: 7-6, 4-4 Big Ten, fourth in East

Returning starters: 14 (seven offense, five defense, kicker, punter)

Players to watch: QB Trace McSorley, RB Saquon Barkley, WR Chris Godwin, WR DaeSean Hamilton, DE Garrett Sickels, LB Brandon Bell

The big questions: Can Penn State improve on the seven wins it has had in coach James Franklin's first two seasons now that it is back to 85 scholarships? Can Trace McSorley fill the hole left by Christian Hackenberg at quarterback? Will Saquon Barkley have a breakout season after rushing for 1,076 yards as a freshman last



Penn State running back Saquon Barkley takes a handoff from quarterback Trace McSorley during a practice in preseason training camp.

AP Photo

fall? Will Penn State's offensive line improve?

Coach's quote: "I think there are very

high expectations at Penn State, and there should be." – James Franklin

RUTGERS

Last year: 4-8, 1-7 Big Ten, tie for sixth in East

Returning starters: 14 (eight offense, six defense)

Players to watch: QB Chris Laviano, RB Josh Hicks, RB Rob Martin, WR Andre Patton, DT Darius Hamilton,

The big questions: Can Rutgers improve offensively after being held to fewer than 20 points in five games last season? Who is the quarterback, last year's

starter Chris Laviano (16 TDs, 12 INTs), LSU transfer Hayden Rettig or TCU graduate transfer Zach Allen? Can former Ohio State co-defensive coordinator Chris Ash get New Jersey recruits to stay home?

Coach's quote: "We have some areas that are very strong, both personnel-wise and facilities-wise and support-wise. And we have areas that we need to improve upon." – Chris Ash



AP Photo

Rutgers quarterback Chris Laviano (5) gets off a pass under pressure from Wisconsin linebacker Vince Biegel (47) during a game last season.

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BIG TEN WEST DIVISION

ILLINOIS

Last year:

5-7, 2-6 Big Ten, tied for fifth West

Returning starters:

10 (5 offense, 4 defense, punter)

Players to watch: QB Wes Lunt, RB Ke-Shawn Vaughn, WR Malik Turner, DE Dawaune Smoot, DT Chunky Clements, LB Hardy Nickerson Jr.

The big questions: Will former Chicago Bears coach Lovie Smith be the home run hire Illinois thinks he is? Can Smith make Illinois a recruiting presence in Chicago? Will the progress the Illini made on defense last season continue? Will the offense make strides after failing to score more than 14 points in five of its Big Ten games?

Coach's quote: "We realize we have to put a better product on the football field. It's as simple as that." – Lovie Smith.



Illinois quarterback Wes Lunt looks to pass during the first half of a game against Northwestern last season. Former Chicago Bears coach Lovie Smith has taken over the Illini this season.

AP Photo

MINNESOTA

Last year: 6-7, 2-6 Big Ten, tie fifth West

Returning starters:

15 (seven offense, seven defense, kicker)

Players to watch: QB Mitch Leidner, RB Shannon Brooks, TE Brandon Lingen, DT Steven Richardson, LB Jacky Lynn, LB Cody Pook

The big questions: Will Tracy Claeys continue the turnaround Jerry Kill started before having to resign for health reasons during the season last year? Who is going to replace K.J. Maye as Leidner's top receiver? Is having two junior college transfers penciled in as starters on the offensive line a reason to be concerned?

Coach's quote: "I think that we have to get back to being physical up front and being able to run the ball on a more consistent basis." – Tracy Claeys

Iowa coach Kirk Ferentz reacts to a Stanford touchdown in the Rose Bowl. Iowa is determined to prove its 12-0 start last season was not a fluke.

AP Photo



IOWA

Last year:

12-2, 8-0 Big Ten, Conference runner-up

Returning starters:

13 (five offense, eight defense)

Players to watch: QB C.J. Beathard, RB LeShun Daniels, WR Matt Vandenberg, CB Desmond King

The big questions: Is Iowa destined for a return trip to the Big Ten championship game? Can quarterback C.J. Beathard be as good or better than he was last year in his first season as a starter (17 TDs, 5 INTs)? Does anyone in the Big Ten have a better schedule than the Hawkeyes who get Michigan, Nebraska and Wisconsin at home and don't play Ohio State and Michigan State?

Coach's quote: "Basically since 1999, when we got here, our goal has been the same, to be Big Ten champions," – Kirk Ferentz

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NEBRASKA**Last year:**

6-7, 3-5 Big Ten, fourth in West

Returning starters:

12 (six offense, five defense, kicker)

Players to watch: QB Tommy Armstrong, WR Jordan Westerkamp, TE Cethan Carter, RB Terrell Newby, LB Josh Banderas, SS Nate Gerry

The big questions: Can quarterback Tommy Armstrong improve his 54-percent career completion percentage? Will Armstrong running the ball be a bigger part of the offense? Will the death of punter Sam Foltz inspire the Cornhusker or weigh on them? Will Nebraska fans grow impatient with coach Mike Riley if the record doesn't improve in a hurry?

Coach's quote: "We have to run the football. Physically, we want to impose our will. Running the ball is the best way to do that." – Mike Riley

WISCONSIN

Last year: 10-3, 6-2 Big Ten, tie second West

Returning starters: 10 (five offense, 4 defense, kicker)

Players to watch: RB Corey Clement, WR Robert Wheelwright, DE Chiwe Obasih, LB Vince Biegel, CB Sojourn Shelton

The big questions: Can running back Corey Clement bounce back from a disappointing 2015 season in which he missed eight games because of a sports hernia after being considered a Heisman Trophy candidate in the preseason? Who will replace Joel Stave at quarterback? After several years of coaching instability is Wisconsin's program headed for a downturn?

Coach's quote: "it certainly does grab a player's attention when you know you're playing against a heck of an opponent (LSU) for your first game." – Paul Chryst



Wisconsin's T.J. Watt (42), top, the younger brother of NFL star J.J. Watt, knocks down a pass thrown by Northwestern quarterback Clayton Thorson (18) during the first half of a game last season.

AP Photo

PURDUE

Last year: 2-10, 1-7 Big Ten, seventh West

Returning starters: 17 (eight offense, eight defense, punter)

Players to watch: QB David Blough, RB Markell Jones, WR DeAngelo Yancey, DT Jake Replogle, LB Ja'Whaun Bentley, LB Danny Ezechukwu.

The big questions: How many wins will it take to let coach Darrell Hazell, a former assistant at Ohio State, keep his job? Especially now that there is a new athletic director. Can a defense that gave up 36.5 points a game last year improve with eight returning starters? Will attendance continue to lag for the Boilermakers at Ross-Ade Stadium?

Coach's quote: "I know we're in a position right now to go out and win some football games." – Darrell Hazell

NORTHWESTERN

Last year: 10-3, 6-2 Big Ten, tied second West

Returning starters: 13 (five offense, six defense, kicker, punter)

Players to watch: QB Clayton Thorson, RB Justin Jackson, WR Austin Carr, DT Tyler Lancaster, LB Anthony Walker, S Godwin Igwebuike

The big questions: Will Northwestern have a passing game this season after averaging only 138 yards a game last season in Clayton Thorson's first year as a starting quarterback with an inexperienced group of receivers? Can the Wildcats be competitive against the big boys, unlike last season, when their losses to Michigan, Iowa and Tennessee were by a combined score of 145-16? Can they reach 10 wins again?

Coach's quote: "I like our competitive depth. I like the athleticism of the group." – Pat Fitzgerald



AP Photo

Northwestern quarterback Clayton Thorson (18) hands off to running back Justin Jackson (21) during a game against Minnesota last season.

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An elite eight for the playoff

By Jim Naveau

jnaveau@civitasmedia.com

A look at eight teams who could challenge for a spot in the College Football Playoff this year:

ALABAMA

The Crimson Tide makes it nearly impossible to leave them off a list of playoff contenders any year.

Even after having seven players, including Heisman Trophy winner Derrick Henry, selected in the first three rounds of the NFL draft, Alabama is the team to beat in the Southeastern Conference. With talent like former five-star running back recruit Bo Scarborough on the roster, no one feels sorry for the Tide.

CLEMSON

The Tigers were runner-up to Alabama last year and have Heisman Trophy candidate Deshaun Watson (4,104 yards passing) back from that 14-1 team. Watson was sacked only 18 times in 15 games last year. Wayne Gallman rushed for 1,527 yards but only three starters are back on defense.

OKLAHOMA

The Sooners can move the



Alabama coach Nick Saban and his team celebrate their 38-0 win over Michigan State in a College Football Playoff semifinal game on New Year's Eve. AP photo

ball. Quarterback Baker Mayfield threw for 3,700 yards and 36 touchdowns and the ground game has two good options in Samaje Perrine (1,349 yards last season) and Joe Mixon (753 yards).

TENNESSEE

The Vols have 19 starters, including Minster's Ethan Wolf at tight end, back from a team that finished 9-4 last season. The four losses came by a total of 17 points. They won their last six

games and blasted Northwestern 45-6 in the Outback Bowl.

LSU

When the Tigers started 7-0 their fans were talking national championship and when they

lost the next three they wanted to fire coach Les Miles. Neither one happened. But with Leonard Fournette (1,953 yards rushing) they might have a chance at the playoff.

HOUSTON

The Cougars were 13-1 in Tom Herman's first year as their head coach. To get to the playoffs they have to win their opener against Oklahoma and then probably run the table. With quarterback Greg Ward and Herman, that's possible.

STANFORD

A big offensive line and Heisman Trophy runner-up Christian McCaffrey could take the Cardinal a long way. Their 45-16 win over Iowa gave them 12 wins last season.

SOME BIG TEN TEAM

The Big Ten might be a longshot to get into the CFP this year but someone could pull it off. Ohio State, Michigan, Michigan State and Iowa have the potential to get into this conversation. But they all have question marks, too. Michigan is the only one of the four that is probably better than a year ago but it has to play at OSU, at Michigan State and at Iowa.

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OSU-MSU rivalry a strong No. 2

By Jim Naveau

jnaveau@civitasmedia.com

COLUMBUS — Urban Meyer has said it over and over since the day he was hired as Ohio State's football coach.

Ohio State has one rival, Michigan, that will forever remain its No. 1 adversary. Nothing will ever become bigger in terms of a rivalry than the final Saturday of the regular season when a Buckeyes player or coach looks at the schedule.

But the events of the last few seasons have pushed the Michigan State game very close to the top of the list.

OSU has been denied two chances to play for a national championship in the last three seasons because of losses to the Spartans.

Michigan State's 34-24 win over the Buckeyes in the 2013 Big Ten Championship game kept OSU from playing in the BCS national championship game. Then last year Michigan State crushed Ohio State's hopes of back-to-back national championships with a 17-14 regular-season win in Ohio Stadium.

OSU was favored in both those games. But the Spartans came out on top both times.

If Michigan is that team up north to Ohio State, is Michigan State close to becoming that other team up north?

"It's huge," Meyer said about playing Michigan State. "We've got a lot of respect, obviously, for the way they go about their business. It's a real rivalry and it will be again this year.

"But we've got the main rival and everybody knows who that is. That will never change," he said.

Ohio State junior linebacker Raekwon McMillan left no doubt those losses to Michigan State are something he and his teammates haven't forgotten.

When he was asked earlier this summer what he wanted to improve this season, the first words out of his mouth were, "Beat Michigan State."

Michigan State's players say they rank the Ohio State game similarly to the way OSU's players do.

"It's almost there. I wouldn't say it's all the way there. The Michigan game is a special game for us, but the Ohio State game is too. Both are great programs," MSU linebacker Riley Bullough said. "Each of those weeks we kind of step up our games in practice."

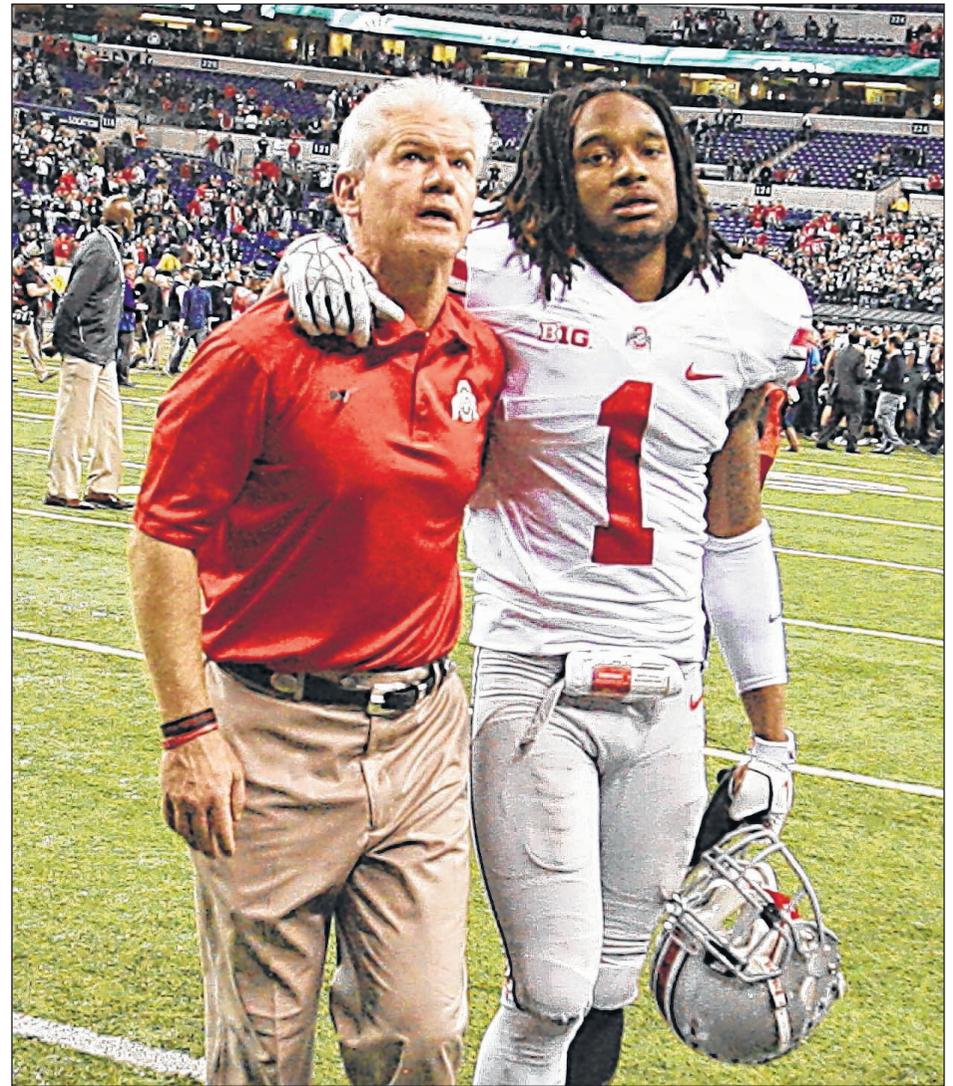
Michigan State linebacker Andrew Dowell and his twin brother David, who are from suburban Cleveland, are among almost two dozen Spartans who are from Ohio.

Andrew Dowell said that adds something to the rivalry for him and his brother.

"Personally, for me being from Ohio, even when we (he and twin brother) committed all we heard was Ohio State. It was really good to go down there and get that win," he said.

Ohio State plays at Michigan State Nov. 19.

Reach Jim Naveau at 567-242-0414 or on Twitter at @Lima_Naveau.



DON SPECK/The Lima News

Assistant coach Kerry Coombs and Bradley Roby (1) walk off the field after Ohio State's loss to Michigan State in the 2013 Big Ten championship game.

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