

INSIDE THE BIG TEN

PREVIEWING THE BIG TEN CONFERENCE

- » **BUCKEYES' REIGN CONTINUES**
- » **HARBAUGH ERA BEGINS**
- » **BOUNCE-BACK FOR HACK**
- » **SPARTANS STILL UNDERRATED?**

5 KEY BIG TEN QUESTIONS

HOW DOMINANT CAN OHIO STATE BE?

The Buckeyes are the consensus preseason No. 1 team, quite a turnaround from the team that as of last November was down to its third-string quarterback and had no guarantees of making the College Football Playoff. With a three-time national championship coach, an embarrassment of riches at quarterback, four first-team Athlon Sports All-Americans and 14 total returning starters, Ohio State is gearing up for another run at a national title. With the exception of perhaps Michigan State, no team in the Big Ten is built to challenge the Buckeyes. Ohio State could be a double-digit favorite in every game until a Nov. 21 home date with the Spartans. If Ohio State plays like it did late last season, few teams should come close to the Buckeyes. But we can't forget: A team made up of college kids can be a little unpredictable.

HOW QUICKLY CAN JIM HARBAUGH TURN MICHIGAN INTO A WINNER?

Harbaugh's quirks made for great summer news blurbs. Now the real work begins. Michigan is 6-10 in the Big Ten the last two seasons, has lost 12 of the last 14 meetings against Ohio State and has lost six of seven against Michigan State. That's not going to turn around in one season even under the prodigal son Harbaugh, but the coach's track record indicates it will change eventually. Harbaugh's touch is needed immediately on the offensive side of the ball, where Michigan was one of the worst teams in the nation last season. September won't be easy with a road trip to Utah — a team that beat the last two Michigan coaches in Ann Arbor — and a home date against BYU. Big Ten titles are always the goal at Michigan, but Harbaugh's first season will be a success if the Wolverines are playing in a bowl game during the holidays.

WILL WE ALL REGRET OVERLOOKING MICHIGAN STATE?

Michigan State has won 53 games since 2010. Only seven teams have won more over that span. The Spartans are coming off another 11-win season — including a comeback victory over Big 12 champion Baylor in the Cotton Bowl — and a top-five AP finish. Despite that success, Ohio State and Michigan dominated offseason talk in the Big Ten. Taking cues from coach Mark Dantonio, the Spartans seem to relish this spot in the Big Ten hierarchy. Losing heralded defensive coordinator Pat Narduzzi (now the head coach at Pittsburgh) and two standout corners is significant, but the Spartans have enough returning to make Ohio State sweat. Connor Cook will be one of the league's best quarterbacks, and end Shilique Calhoun will anchor one of the Big Ten's best defensive lines. That's a solid foundation for another 10-win season.



Ezekiel Elliott's emergence late last season — he rushed for 696 yards in the final three games — played a key role in the Buckeyes' run to the national title.

WILL CHRISTIAN HACKENBERG BOUNCE BACK?

As a freshman under former Penn State coach Bill O'Brien, Christian Hackenberg emerged as one of the league's brightest young stars. Hackenberg's first season under James Franklin, though, was rocky (and that is being kind) as the hotshot NFL prospect threw 15 INTs and took 44 sacks. The offensive line was in shambles all season, and the receivers were untested. Now, there's nowhere to go but up. Penn State returns four offensive line starters and adds a junior college All-American at tackle. Don't be surprised if the Penn State offense shows significant improvement in what figures to be Hackenberg's final season in Happy Valley.

WILL THE BIG TEN WEST PUT UP A FIGHT?

Believe it or not, there is another division in the Big Ten. The Big Ten East has the league's top College Football Playoff contenders (Ohio State, Michigan State), the top quarterbacks (J.T. Barrett, Cardale Jones, Cook and Hackenberg) and the league's "it" coach (Harbaugh). The West, then, is fighting for scraps. The top two contenders in the division, Wisconsin and Nebraska, are breaking in new coaches in Paul Chryst and Mike Riley, respectively. Minnesota and Northwestern may continue to play better than the sum of their parts. Iowa could surprise in one of those years when no one is paying attention to the Hawkeyes. All of that, though, is wishful thinking. The Big Ten Championship Game may be a formality once again.

PROJECTIONS

Projected order of finish

EAST DIVISION	B1G	OVERALL
1. OHIO STATE	8-0	13-0
2. MICHIGAN STATE	6-2	10-2
3. PENN STATE	4-4	8-4
4. MICHIGAN	4-4	7-5
5. MARYLAND	3-5	6-6
6. INDIANA	2-6	6-6
7. RUTGERS	1-7	5-7

WEST DIVISION	B1G	OVERALL
1. WISCONSIN	6-2	9-4
2. NEBRASKA	5-3	8-4
3. MINNESOTA	5-3	8-4
4. IOWA	4-4	7-5
5. NORTHWESTERN	4-4	6-6
6. ILLINOIS	3-5	6-6
7. PURDUE	1-7	3-9

BIG TEN CHAMPIONSHIP GAME
OHIO STATE OVER WISCONSIN

ACC BOWL PREDICTIONS

- CFB Playoff** Ohio State vs. Auburn
- Rose Bowl** Michigan State vs. USC
- Citrus Bowl** Wisconsin vs. Tennessee
- Outback Bowl** Nebraska vs. Arkansas
- Holiday Bowl** Penn State vs. Stanford
- Foster Farms Bowl** Minnesota vs. UCLA
- Pinstripe Bowl** Michigan vs. Virginia Tech
- Music City Bowl** Iowa vs. Missouri
- Quick Lane Bowl** Northwestern vs. Pittsburgh
- Armed Forces Bowl** Maryland vs. Air Force
- Arizona Bowl** Indiana vs. Miami (Fla.)



Christian Hackenberg, Penn State

2015 ATHLON SPORTS PRESEASON ALL-BIG TEN TEAM

OFFENSE			
QB	Connor Cook	6-4/220/Sr.	Michigan State
RB	Corey Clement	5-11/217/Jr.	Wisconsin
RB	Ezekiel Elliott	6-0/225/Jr.	Ohio State
WR	Leonte Carroo	6-1/205/Sr.	Rutgers
WR	DaeSean Hamilton	6-1/211/So.	Penn State
TE	Josiah Price	6-4/250/Jr.	Michigan State
C	Jack Allen	6-2/295/Sr.	Michigan State
OL	Jack Conklin	6-6/317/Jr.	Michigan State
OL	Taylor Decker	6-8/315/Sr.	Ohio State
OL	Pat Elflein	6-3/300/Jr.	Ohio State
OL	Tyler Marz	6-5/321/Sr.	Wisconsin
AP	De'Mornay Pierson-El	5-9/185/So.	Nebraska

DEFENSE			
DE	Joey Bosa	6-6/275/Jr.	Ohio State
DE	Shilique Calhoun	6-5/250/Sr.	Michigan State
DT	Maliek Collins	6-2/300/Jr.	Nebraska
DT	Anthony Zettel	6-4/278/Sr.	Penn State
LB	Vince Biegel	6-4/244/Jr.	Wisconsin
LB	Darron Lee	6-2/235/So.	Ohio State
LB	Joshua Perry	6-4/254/Sr.	Ohio State
CB	Eli Apple	6-1/200/So.	Ohio State
CB	William Likely	5-7/175/Jr.	Maryland
S	Vonn Bell	5-11/205/Jr.	Ohio State
S	Michael Caputo	6-1/212/Sr.	Wisconsin

SPECIALISTS			
K	Brad Craddock	6-0/189/Sr.	Maryland
P	Peter Mortell	6-2/191/Sr.	Minnesota
KR	Janarion Grant	5-11/175/Jr.	Rutgers
PR	De'Mornay Pierson-El	5-9/185/So.	Nebraska



SCOUTING THE BIG TEN... OPPOSING COACHES SIZE UP THEIR RIVALS

ILLINOIS "Their defense was terrible. Almost everybody scored a ton of points on them and gained over 400 yards. I can't think of anybody on their defense that jumped out at you, where you thought, 'Hey, that guy can really play.'"

INDIANA "I think their offensive scheme is really good. I think Kevin Wilson is a very good coach. Their offensive line was one of the better lines we played against last year."

IOWA "I think the key to their whole team is what happens at offensive tackle. They've got to be able to run the ball, and they're losing two excellent tackles who played almost every snap the last couple years."

MARYLAND "Offensively, they were a week-to-week operation — very opponent-specific in their plan. One week you might see a lot of one thing and not see it much the next week."

MICHIGAN "I think it's pretty cool that Jim Harbaugh is in the league. I think it's good for the league and it's obviously good for Michigan. He's helped the perception of our league."

MICHIGAN STATE "Everybody talked about Pat Narduzzi and the Michigan State defense, but they averaged over 500 yards of offense last year. That was the story with that team."

MINNESOTA "You'd think they'd throw it more just by accident looking for some screens, open it up a little bit when they're behind. But they're going to do what they do and they're very committed to how they play."

NEBRASKA "Tommy Armstrong is just a guy. His skill set doesn't really fit the system they want to run because he's so limited throwing the ball."

NORTHWESTERN "They have a good receiving corps, but they dropped an incredible amount of passes. They had guys wide open, and they would drop the ball. They could have beaten Cal and Northern Illinois if they would have caught one or two more passes."

OHIO STATE "They were one of the best looking teams I have ever seen in person. And they are well coached. Urban Meyer does a great job tailoring his offense to what the quarterback can do. That offense was so good late in the year. A lot of it was confidence."

PENN STATE "They were a trainwreck on offense. I know the quarterback (Christian Hackenberg) is a good player, but my gosh, he got hit more times than I can count."

PURDUE "The freshman linebacker (Ja'Whaun Bentley) is a guy they can build around. He was pretty explosive, and they had a couple other young backers who we thought were pretty talented."

RUTGERS "Leonte Carroo is a really good player, one of the better receivers we saw. We were very aware of him. He made a lot of big plays. He was a perfect 'X' receiver for what they were trying to do."

WISCONSIN "They don't have a bunch of great cover guys in the secondary, but it didn't matter as much because of how much pressure they were able to put on the quarterback. They need the front seven to help them out again if they are going to be as good on defense."



RECRUITING

BIG TEN RECRUITING RANKINGS

- | | |
|-------------------|------------------|
| 1. Ohio State | 8. Maryland |
| 2. Penn State | 9. Indiana |
| 3. Michigan State | 10. Northwestern |
| 4. Nebraska | 11. Rutgers |
| 5. Wisconsin | 12. Iowa |
| 6. Michigan | 13. Minnesota |
| 7. Illinois | 14. Purdue |

TOP 30 BIG TEN SIGNEES

- | | | |
|-------------------------|----|----------------|
| 1. Justin Hilliard | LB | Ohio State |
| 2. L.J. Scott | RB | Michigan State |
| 3. Jerome Baker | LB | Ohio State |
| 4. Brian Cole | WR | Michigan |
| 5. Torrence Gibson | QB | Ohio State |
| 6. Michael Weber | RB | Ohio State |
| 7. Jashon Cornell | DL | Ohio State |
| 8. Eric Glover-Williams | DB | Ohio State |
| 9. Isaiah Prince | OL | Ohio State |
| 10. Matthew Burrell | OL | Ohio State |
| 11. Saquon Barkley | RB | Penn State |
| 12. Adam McLean | DL | Maryland |
| 13. Garrett Taylor | DB | Penn State |
| 14. John Reid | DB | Penn State |
| 15. Eric Lee Jr. | DB | Nebraska |
| 16. Juwan Johnson | WR | Penn State |
| 17. Dre'Mont Jones | DL | Ohio State |
| 18. K.J. Hill | WR | Ohio State |
| 19. Ryan Bates | OL | Penn State |
| 20. Zach Gentry | QB | Michigan |
| 21. Jalin Barnett | OL | Nebraska |
| 22. Kyonta Stallworth | OL | Michigan State |
| 23. Gabe Megginson | OL | Illinois |
| 24. Tyree Kinnel | DB | Michigan |
| 25. Jordan Stevenson | RB | Nebraska |
| 26. Raequan Williams | DL | Michigan State |
| 27. Sterling Jenkins | OL | Penn State |
| 28. Nick Conner | LB | Ohio State |
| 29. Grant Newsome | OL | Michigan |
| 30. Kamonte Carter | DL | Penn State |

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