

## **Next Northern Hope**

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By now, the Big Ten and all of its college baseball programs are tired of hearing about how the conference has failed the past several years to make a significant imprint on the national stage.

Michigan has had some moments in the last decade. The Wolverines hosted an NCAA Regional in Ann Arbor, Mich., with Arizona as the No. 1 seed. They also defeated Vanderbilt in an NCAA Regional when the Commodores were the top national seed.

But outside of those accomplishments and an occasional Minnesota postseason triumph, the Big Ten continues to look for a presence on the national stage. The league continues to make strides from a facilities standpoint, and fan support is increasing.

Still, when it comes to the national picture, observers want results. After all, the last Big Ten club to reach the College World Series was Michigan in 1984. Additionally, much hype was placed on Ohio State in 2010. That year, the Buckeyes finished what was supposed to be a promising campaign with a 28-23 record, seventh-place league finish.

Perhaps Purdue, which is favored to win the Big Ten, will turn the tide of the conference with a strong 2012 campaign.

"I'd like to think this is going to be a good year for the Big Ten," Purdue coach Doug Schreiber said. "A lot of teams in this league have some pitching back and you now add Nebraska to the mix, we're going to be expecting multiple NCAA at-large bids."

Before Purdue talks competing for an NCAA Regional or NCAA Super Regional, Schreiber and the Boilermakers primarily are focused – at least for now – on competing for the Big Ten regular season title, a feat that hasn't been accomplished since 1909. To put that in perspective, Purdue began baseball in 1888.

With that said, there are plenty of reasons to feel good about this year's Purdue club, is knocking on the door to the PG Top 25 rankings entering this season.

The Boilermakers return all nine position players, including talented prospects, infielder Cameron Perkins and catcher Kevin Plawecki. On the mound, the club will be without last year's ace – right-handed pitcher Brad Schreiber – but otherwise welcomes back every pitcher but little-used Tyler Calder.

This is a veteran group with incredibly high expectations, coming off a season that included a second-place Big Ten finish and 37-20 overall record.

"Anytime you have some legitimate stars coming back at every position, that type of thing allows us to play with a lot of confidence," Schreiber said. "I think offensively, with an older club, we're going to play with a lot of confidence. As for the pitching staff, you'd like to have Schreiber because he's a power arm, but we have some good arms, and our bullpen will be very good."

It's easy to see why the Boilermakers have such high expectations for their offense. They finished last season with an impressive .309 batting average (at least by the new BBCOR bat standards), and had a team on-base percentage of .402.

From that squad, second baseman Eric Charles is the top returning hitter, batting .351 with three home runs and 39 RBIs last season. Meanwhile, Perkins and Plawecki – two talented prospects – are expected to have highly productive campaigns. Perkins hit .349 with eight home runs and 53 RBIs last season, while Plawecki hit .341 with two home runs and 39 RBIs.

Looking at the rest of the lineup, senior center fielder Tyler Spillner isn't your typical leadoff hitter, as he doesn't possess exceptional speed. However, he's a consistent hitter who is coming off a campaign where he hit .328 with four home runs and 33 RBIs.

Keep a very close eye on emerging junior left-fielder Stephen Talbott. The physically-impressive 6-foot-3, 205-pounder, had an outstanding fall and promises to play a bigger role this spring. He batted .301 with two home runs and 32 RBIs last season.

"You know, he's going to hit in the 8 or 9-hole for us, but he's a very fast runner, having run a 6.50, 60-yard-dash this past fall. He has some pop, too," Schreiber said. "He's a nice nugget to have in that spot in the lineup. He also was 17-for-17 in stolen bases last season. He's definitely a guy to watch."

Freshman dual-threat Kyle Wood is also worth watching. Wood won't be able to pitch this spring after having Tommy John surgery after high school season last spring. However, he's expected to be a consistent contributor at the plate."

Moving to the pitching staff, it has already been established Brad Schreiber will miss the 2012 campaign after having offseason elbow surgery, putting the Boilermakers starting rotation in limbo.

With that, look for senior right-hander Joe Haase to be elevated to staff ace. Haase isn't quite the power pitcher Schreiber is, but can pitch in the 87-90 mph range with his fastball. He also has a very competitive attitude with much experience.

Senior left-handed pitcher Calvin Gunter, who had a 6.75 ERA in 45 1/3 innings last season is expected to rise to the occasion this spring. He's a guy that throws 87 with his fastball from the left side with a good slider and solid changeup. Meanwhile, senior righty Lance Breedlove will assume the Sunday role to start the campaign. Breedlove has good command, walking just two batters all of fall workouts. Additionally, the righty has good movement on his fastball, which runs 88-90 mph. He also throws a slider and changeup. But in terms of stuff, command is his greatest attribute.

As the season progresses, don't be surprised to see junior left-hander Angelo Cianfrocco enter the weekend rotation. The veteran had offseason surgery to repair a dislocated non-throwing shoulder, and will be throwing to start the spring. However, he won't be in starting shape by February. When healthy, he tops out at 88 with his fastball.

The Boilermakers feel great about their bullpen. Junior right-handed pitcher Nick Wittgren is a rising prospect after a solid summer at the Cape Cod League, where he was ranked the league's No. 67 prospect with an electric 91-94 fastball and a hammer curve. At 6-foot-3, 205 pounds, he's definitely a rising prospect to watch.

Other arms to watch include right-handers Brett Andrzejewski and Andrew Quinnette. Andrzejewski will serve as a situational reliever leading up to closer Nick Wittgren. Meanwhile, Quinnette, a Valparaiso transfer, missed last season because of surgery, but will have an important role this spring.

Also keep an eye on left-hander Blake Mascarello. The 6-foot-1, 200-pounder, had a 5.08 ERA in 39 appearances last season, striking out 33 and walking just nine.

Overall, Purdue is far from a perfect northern team. It has some serious question marks with its weekend rotation, making it a tough choice to put squarely in the Preseason PG Top 25. However, this club has a wealth of experience with a solid bullpen and a very talented offensive lineup.

The Big Ten hasn't gotten a team to Omaha in 27 seasons.

That legitimately could change if Purdue's weekend rotation steps up.

## **PROSPECT WATCH**

**Nick Wittgren, rhp, junior:** Wittgren improved his stock as a prospect with a solid summer with the Hyannis Harbor Hawks of the Cape Cod League. The 6-foot-3, 205-pounder, had a 3.18 ERA and 12 saves, using a solid 91-94 mph fastball mixed with a hammer curve to take control. Will be one of the northern region's elite arms this spring.

**Cameron Perkins, inf, junior:** Perkins has impressive size at 6-foot-5, 200 pounds, and can throw 86 mph in the infield. Additionally, he is a high IQ baseball guy who has pretty solid speed for his size. Perkins has the potential to be a top six or seven rounder because of his versatility. In addition to his contributions as a hitter, Perkins can hit 90 on the radar gun in a relief role.

**Kevin Plawecki, c, junior:** Plawecki certainly fits the bill of a catcher with upside with a naked eye. The talented veteran backstop is physical with good catch-throw skills. He also has a quick release that tends to overshadow the fact he has average arm strength. Additionally, he's a good hitter with legitimate power. Plawecki hit .341 with just two home runs last season. He's expected to hit with more power this season.