

OHIO STATE 2023 FOOTBALL PREVIEW

Saturday traditions

Big Ten changing
but OSU's goals don't

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Tough losses motivate Buckeyes

By Jim Naveau

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COLUMBUS — A lot of college football programs would look back at a season in which they won 11 games and came within a play or two of playing for a national championship and think it was a successful season.

But that's how it works at Ohio State. As the Buckeyes prepare for the 2023 season after going 11-2 and reaching the semifinals of the College Football Playoff last season they are talking about where they could have done better a year ago and how that motivates them this year.

While there was a trip to the playoff, for the second year in a row there was no Big Ten championship and there was no win over Michigan. And last season's Michigan game and the 42-41 loss to Georgia in the playoff semifinal both highlighted OSU's season-long struggle to defend against big plays.



One of Ohio State wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr.'s many skills is his ability to bend, stretch and twist better than most receivers, which this catch against Rutgers last season illustrates. Photos by Don Speck | The Lima News

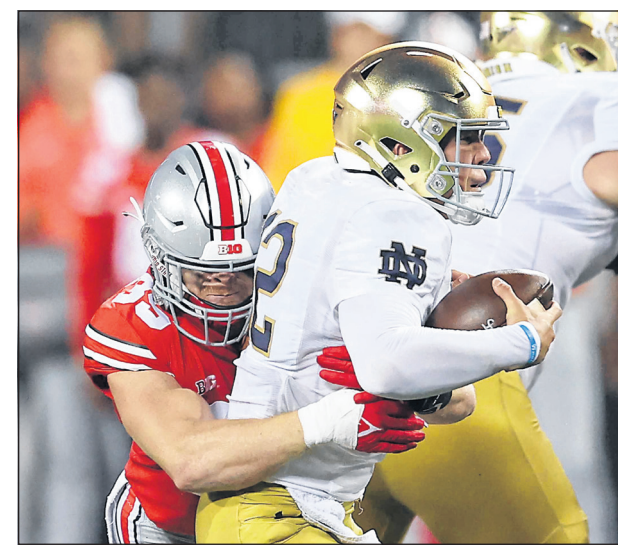
Ohio State led 20-17 at halftime against Michigan last year but was outscored 28-3 in the second half. Four huge scoring plays for Michigan — touchdown passes of 69 yards and 75 yards from J.J. McCarthy to Cornelius Johnson in the first half and touchdown runs of 75 yards and 85 yards by Donovan Edwards late in the fourth quarter of UM's 45-23 win

— gave the Wolverines a second consecutive dominating win in the rivalry.

OSU led Georgia 38-24 going into the fourth quarter but lost 42-41 when the Bulldogs scored on a 76-yard touchdown pass and on a 72-yard drive late in the fourth quarter.

It was a lot to think about. And Ohio State has thought about it a lot since last season.

“Explosive plays certainly is what really was our Achilles heel,” Ohio State coach Ryan Day said at Big Ten Football Media Days. “We know that. We’ve talked about it. How much do we talk about the rivalry game and winning at the end of the season? We talk about it every day. We do. We’re not going to sit there and let it beat us twice, but it is a motivating factor for



Ohio State linebacker Tommy Eichenberg, shown sacking Notre Dame quarterback Tyler Buchner last season, was first-team All-Big Ten and a second-team All-American in 2022.

sure,” he said.

Wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr. said, “It’s no secret about it. You have to win that game (the Michigan game). If you come to Ohio State that’s the one game you have to win, you must win and we haven’t done that the past two years.

“We went back to the drawing board this offseason to try to get tougher in

the weight room and how we approach the game on the field. You have to run the ball and stop the run. It all goes from there.”

So, can Ohio State beat Michigan, win the Big Ten championship and make a run at a national championship?

Here are five reasons it can and five reasons it can’t.

Five reasons Ohio State

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Ohio State junior running back TreVeyon Henderson hopes to be the dynamic runner and pass catcher he was as a freshman after playing most of last season with a broken bone in his foot and seeing his rushing yardage drop from 1,248 yards as a freshman to 571 yards last season.



Ohio State running back Miyan Williams puts a stiff arm on an Arkansas State defender in a game last season. Williams led OSU in rushing last year with 825 yards.

will win the Big Ten championship, will beat Michigan and will make a run at the national championship:

1. Ohio State will be OK whoever plays quarterback.

Ryan Day has worked with Ohio State's quarterback since 2017 when Urban Meyer hired him as an assistant coach.

Every OSU quarterback who played a full season from 2017 through 2022 — J.T. Barrett, Dwayne Haskins, Justin Fields and C.J. Stroud (twice) — has passed for at least 3,000 yards and 35 touchdowns. Fields also would have done it twice if the 2020 season hadn't been shortened to eight games by Covid-19. Every one of those players has been the first-team All-Big Ten quarterback.

McCord was a 5-star recruit and Devin Brown was a 4-star who flipped from USC to Ohio State, so Day will have some good raw material to work with whoever is in the game.

2. Ohio State has arguably the best receivers in college

football.

Ohio State was the only team to have two receivers, Marvin Harrison Jr. and Emeka Egbuka, in the top 10 nationally in receiving yards last season and to have two receivers in the top 13 nationally in touchdown catches. If Julian Fleming stays healthy he could give OSU a third wide receiver who makes opposing defensive coordinators nervous.

3. Help is on the way in the defensive backfield.

Cornerback was a trouble spot for the Buckeyes last year. Some cornerbacks just didn't play up to expectations. At least part of the reason was that two of best players at that position struggled with injuries much of last season.

Denzel Burke, who started as a freshman in 2021, suffered a preseason shoulder injury last year. Then he had surgery on his hand in September and also had ankle and finger injuries and played through all those challenges. Jordan Hancock was idled for eight weeks because of

a hamstring injury.

Talented sophomore safety Sonny Styles is a player defensive coordinator Jim Knowles says has proved he has to be on the field. OSU also brought in two defensive backs through the transfer portal — cornerback Davison Igbinosun, who started as a freshman at Ole Miss last season, and safety Ja'Had Carter, who was honorable mention All-ACC at Syracuse last season.

4. Ohio State might have the second-best group of running backs in the Big Ten after Michigan.

If TreVeyon Henderson and Miyan Williams stay healthy OSU could have two running backs approach or go over 1,000 yards rushing. Dallan Hayden rushed for more than 100 yards against Toledo, Indiana and Maryland last season.

Chip Trayanum ended his linebacker experiment and ran for 83 yards against Michigan last year. And Evan Pryor was highly regarded before a preseason

OHIO STATE FOOTBALL SCHEDULE 2023		
Date	Opponent	Time
Saturday, Sept. 2	at Indiana	3:30 p.m.
Saturday, Sept. 9	Youngstown State	Noon
Saturday, Sept. 16	Western Kentucky	4 p.m.
Saturday, Sept. 23	at Notre Dame	7:30 p.m.
Saturday, Sept. 30	Bye Week	
Saturday, Oct. 7	Maryland	TBA
Saturday, Oct. 14	at Purdue	TBA
Saturday, Oct. 21	Penn State	TBA
Saturday, Oct. 28	at Wisconsin	TBA
Saturday, Nov. 4	at Rutgers	TBA
Saturday, Nov. 11	Michigan State	7:30 p.m.
Saturday, Nov. 19	Minnesota	TBA
Saturday, Nov. 25	at Michigan	Noon
Saturday, Dec. 2	Big Ten Championship Game	8 p.m.

knee injury sidelined him all of last season.

5. Ohio State's front seven on defense can be elite.

Defensive end J.T. Tuimoloau

is one of the best in college football at that position and OSU is expecting a huge year from Jack

See MOTIVATE | 7

Five Buckeyes to watch this season

By Jim Naveau

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There are stars all around at Ohio State but here are five of them who could shine especially brightly this season:

Marvin Harrison Jr.

Harrison wasn't eligible for the NFL draft but he still made a big impression on the NFL scouts who were there at Ohio State's Pro Day at the Woody Hayes Athletic Facility in March.

Harrison was on the receiving end of future first-round pick quarterback C.J. Stroud's throws as he showed off his arm talent for the scouts.

Obviously after the season he had, Harrison was no surprise to any of the assembled talent evaluators.

But one scout was particularly impressed. "Like window shopping at a Lamborghini dealership for the model that doesn't come out until next year,"



Ohio States Marvin Harrison Jr. goes up high to make a catch against Indiana last season at Ohio Stadium.

one unnamed scout said, according to the Twitter account of ESPN's Jordan Reid.

Harrison caught 77 passes for 1,263 yards and 14 touchdowns last season as a sophomore for OSU in his first year as a starting wide

receiver.

But maybe even more impressive than just those numbers was his ability to get separation from defenders and twist his body in seemingly impossible ways to make a catch or get a foot down in bounds for a comple-



Ohio State defensive tackle Mike Hall Jr. (51), right, and safety Josh Proctor celebrate a defensive stop against Rutgers last season in Ohio Stadium.

tion.

He was a consensus All-American after being selected first-team All-America by The Associated Press, The Sporting News, The Football Writers of America and The Walter Camp Football Foundation.

He was the first Ohio State receiver to be a consensus All-American since Terry Glenn in 1995.

NFL scouts are not the only ones keeping their eyes focused on Harrison. Opposing defenses will be trying new ways to slow



Sonny Styles, pictured here at the Buckeyes' spring game in April, could become a starter in Ohio State's defensive backfield this season.

him down this season. It's a given he will see double teams a lot of the time, if not all the time.

Harrison is not fazed by the possibility of a steady diet of double teams or reduced statistics this season.

"I think if I'm out

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Emeka Egbuka, shown here making a catch against Iowa last season at Ohio Stadium, and Marvin Harrison Jr. give Ohio State possibly the best pair of receivers in college football.

there and I'm drawing two defenders I'm doing my part in the game. I might not have 100 yards (receiving) or the touchdowns that may be expected of me. But if I'm impacting the game by drawing two defenders and getting other receivers one on ones then I'm doing my part. That's kind of how I look at it," he said at the Big Ten Football Media Days.

Mike Hall Jr.

For the first two games last season Hall was a dominant interior presence on Ohio State's defensive line.

He showed speed and quickness at the snap of the ball that were unusual for a 6-3, 290-pound man. He had two tackles for losses and a sack in the

opener against Notre Dame and in the second game against Arkansas State he had three more tackles for losses and another sack.

But during the Arkansas State game he suffered a shoulder injury which limited him the rest of the season.

He missed the third game of the season against Toledo but played in all the other games. He had another huge game against Michigan State when he had 2.5 sacks while being on the field for only seven snaps.

He finished the season with 4.5 sacks and 7.5 tackles for losses but none of those came in the last seven games of OSU's season. His 4.5 sacks tied Jack Sawyer for the team lead and his

7.5 tackles for losses were the second highest total by a Buckeyes defensive lineman last season.

"It's a new year, it's a new me," Hall said as he looked ahead to this season.

Defensive coordinator Jim Knowles and defensive line coach Larry Johnson expect big things from him if he stays healthy.

"He has tremendous potential. I think the sky is the limit in terms of where he can end up," Knowles said earlier this summer.

Johnson said, "He can be special. He's got all the skill sets to be special. He's just got to stay healthy and go from there. The sky's the limit for him."

Johnson also said

people sometimes overlook how good Hall is at defending against the run.

Sonny Styles

Styles might be Ohio State's version of Elly De La Cruz of the Cincinnati Reds — an exceptionally talented player who fans can't wait to see perform at the highest level.

The sophomore safety got around 75 percent of his playing time last year on special teams. But by the end of the season he had progressed to the point that he was on the field playing defense on 12 snaps in OSU's College Football Playoff semifinal against Georgia.

If defensive coordinator Jim Knowles sticks to his philosophy of putting the best 11 defenders on the

Julian Fleming `33
Xavier Johnson `13

TACKLES

Tommy Eichenberg `120
Steele Chambers `77
Lathan Ransom `74
Ronnie Hickman `53
Denzel Burke `34
Zach Harrison `34

TACKLES FOR LOSS

Tommy Eichenberg `12
J.T. Tuimoloau `10.5
Zach Harrison `8
Mike Hall `7.5
Steele Chambers `6.5
Zach Harrison `6.5

PASSING YARDS

C.J. Stroud `3,688
Kyle McCord `190

RUSHING YARDS

Miyan Williams `825
TreVeyon Henderson `571
Dallan Hayden `553
Xavier Johnson `116

RECEIVING YARDS

Marvin Harrison Jr. `1,263
Emeka Egbuka `1,151
Julian Fleming `533
Cade Stover `406
Jayden Ballard `155

PASS RECEPTIONS

Marvin Harrison Jr. `77
Emeka Egbuka `74
Cade Stover `36

SACKS

Mike Hall `4.5
Jack Sawyer `4.5
Zach Harrison `3.5
J.T. Tuimoloau `3.5

INTERCEPTIONS

Tanner McCalister `3
Steele Chambers `2
J.T. Tuimoloau `2

FIELD GOALS

Noah Ruggles `17/20

PUNTS

Jesse Mirco `45.4



TreVeyon Henderson, shown scoring a touchdown against Toledo last season in Ohio Stadium, hopes for a big season after an injury shortened 2022 season.

field it's hard to see a way Styles won't be one of three starting safeties in the Buckeyes' defense.

"When you look at the potential best 11 players

See WATCH | 7

Worst to best, ranking Ohio State's opponents

Ranking Ohio State's regular season games from the least challenging to the toughest match-up:

12. Youngstown State

The Penguins went 7-4 last season and have 17 returning players who started at least six games last season. But some of the people who know them best — the coaches and athletic department personnel in the Missouri Valley Football Conference and the media members who cover them — picked them to finish sixth in that 12-team league.

YSU does have a couple of interesting Ohio State connections. The biggest is safety Marcus Hooker, who played for Ohio State from 2018-2021 and was honorable mention All-Big Ten in 2020. And wide receiver Max Tomczak is the nephew of former OSU quarterback Mike Tomczak.

11. Indiana

If Indiana is lucky it might win four games this season. If it is unlucky it could win closer



Jim Naveau
Contributing
columnist

to two games. The sunny optimism of 2019 and 2020 when the Hoosiers were 8-5 and 6-2 and briefly climbed into the Top 10 in the rankings has been replaced by rumblings that coach Tom Allen might need a good season to keep his job.

10. Western Kentucky

This could be the first test of whether OSU has fixed its problem of giving up big plays. Western Kentucky quarterback Austin Reed passed for 4,744 yards and 40 touchdowns in 2022 and Malachi Corley (101 catches, 1,295 yards and 11 TDs last season) is viewed as an early round NFL draft pick. But even if they hit on a couple of big scoring plays it's unlikely the Hilltoppers will slow down the Buckeyes' offense enough to pull off an upset.

9. Rutgers

The Scarlet Knights' schedule has a high degree of difficulty. Two of their three crossover games against West Division teams will be at Wisconsin and

at Iowa and their final four games of the regular season are at home against Ohio State, at Iowa, at Penn State and at home against Maryland. They also have to find a quarterback who completes more than 50 percent of his passes.

8. Michigan State

Michigan State has not been a contender in the Big Ten since it went 11-2 in Mel Tucker's first year as its coach in 2021. It wasn't last year. It won't be this year. Probably no one is happier to see C.J. Stroud go to the NFL than the Spartans. He threw six touchdown passes against them in 2021, then did it again last season.

7. Purdue

Purdue has some interesting offensive talent with Texas transfer quarterback Hudson Card and running back Devin Mockobee, a former walk-on who ran for a Purdue freshman record 968 yards last season. The big question is who will block for them after three Boilermakers who were expected to be starting offensive linemen hit the transfer portal.

6. Minnesota

The Gophers have a first-year starter at quarterback, will be replacing the school's all-time leading rusher Mohamed Ibrahim and will have several new starters on the offensive and defensive lines. If redshirt sophomore QB Athan Kaliakmanis can get the ball to a good group of receivers Minnesota could be one of the better teams in the Big Ten West. If not, it could be a long season.

5. Maryland

It looks like another season of throwing a scare into one or more of the top teams in the Big Ten but not getting a win over any of them for the Terrapins. Since joining the Big Ten in 2014 Maryland is 4-29 against Ohio State, Michigan, Penn State, Wisconsin and Iowa.

4. Notre Dame

The Irish expect big things from Wake Forest transfer quarterback Sam Hartman in his sixth season of college football. He has a good offensive line ahead of him and some good running backs behind

him. But ND might come up a little short when the subject is pass catchers.

3. Wisconsin

This is not the first time Luke Fickell has coached against Ohio State. OSU beat his 2019 Cincinnati team 42-0. "Don't remind me," he said when reminded of that game at Big Ten Football Media Days. A win over Ohio State would be a statement game for Wisconsin, which hasn't beaten Ohio State since a 2010 win over the Buckeyes, who came into that night game at Camp Randall Stadium ranked No. 1.

2. Penn State

Similar to Wisconsin, which has lost 12 of its last 13 games to Ohio State, the Nittany Lions have lost 10 of their last 11 games against the Buckeyes. They're hungry and they're talented. A lot depends how fast quarterback Drew Allar develops.

1. Michigan

It would not be a surprise to see the Wolverines come into this game undefeated for a second year in a row.



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Motivate

From page 3

Sawyer at the other end. Defensive tackle Mike Hall dominated early last year before injuries greatly reduced his impact the second half of the season. Linebacker Tommy Eichenberg was first-team All-Big Ten and a second-team All-American. The other linebacker, Steele Chambers, was honorable mention All-Big Ten.

Five reasons Ohio State won't win the Big Ten championship, won't beat Michigan and won't make a run at the national championship:

1. Way too much uncertain-

ty about its offensive line.

Guards Donovan Jackson and Matthew Jones are returning starters. The rest of the offensive linemen have combined for one career start, by Josh Fryar at right tackle against Indiana last season. He has been regarded as the likely starter at left tackle since spring practice. But recently he has been practicing at right tackle and Josh "Jimmy" Simmons, who started at right tackle for San Diego State last season, was at left tackle. Red-shirt sophomore Tegra Tshabola was thought to be the likely starter at right tackle but he has spent some time at left tackle. Fryar and freshman Luke Montgomery are in a competition to be the starter at right tackle,

Day said.

The starter at center is also uncertain. It will probably be sophomore Carson Hinzman or Victor Cutler Jr., a transfer from Louisiana-Monroe.

2. Whoever plays quarterback for Ohio State will be inexperienced and will be starting his first game against Michigan. Meanwhile, Michigan quarterback J.J. McCarthy will be in his second year as a starter.

3. What if Jim Knowles' defense takes more than one season to install or just isn't as good as it was built up to be?

When Ohio State held six of the first seven teams it played in 2022 under 300 yards total

offense and none of those teams scored more than 21 points, everything was sea shells and balloons, as Al McGuire used to say.

But when the Buckeyes faced the four best offenses they played all season in their last six games it was a different story. Penn State gained 482 yards total offense and scored 31 points. Maryland had 402 yards total offense and 30 points. And then Michigan and Georgia really turned up the heat.

The Wolverines gained 530 yards and scored 45 points and Georgia had 533 yards and 42 points.

The questions that were raised by those four games haven't gone away and will be

heard again the first time OSU's defense struggles.

4. Injuries. Jaxon Smith-Njigba's hamstring injury last year showed how one injury can change a team's season. Was there any team in college football last season who had a defense that could have handled Marvin Harrison Jr., Jaxon Smith-Njigba and Emeka Egbuka on the field at the same time if Smith-Njigba hadn't suffered a hamstring injury in the season opener against Notre Dame that ruined his season?

5. The Game is in The Big House this year. Historically Michigan isn't unbeatable at home but it has been the last two seasons when it has won 15 consecutive home games.

Watch

From page 5

for the 2023 defense he's a guy that our staff is going to point at and say, 'We need to find a way to get him in there,' " Knowles said during spring practice.

"I think he's got all kinds of skills. We're going to experiment with him in different places and see what's best for Sonny and our defense. He's ready to play."

Styles says he will "go wherever they tell me to go," and that he will play anywhere. "I'm kind of comfortable at any position," he said.

Styles is the son of Lorenzo Styles, a former first-team All-Big Ten linebacker at OSU who went on to play six years in the NFL.

Sonny Styles, was 5-star recruit who was ranked the No. 1 safety nationally in the 2023 recruiting class. He reclassified, graduated early and became part of the 2022 OSU recruiting class. His brother, Lorenzo Styles Jr., recently transferred to Ohio State from Notre Dame.

Emeka Egbuka

Not everyone knows that Egbuka, not Marvin Harrison Jr., was the No. 1 rated wide receiver recruit nationally in the 2021 recruiting class.

Together, he and Harrison gave Ohio State one of the top pairs of receivers in the country last season. And they should do the same again this season.

Egbuka caught 74 passes for 1,151 yards and had 10 touchdown catches last season. His catches and yardage were both top five all time at OSU. He had 100 or more yards receiving in six games. Harrison achieved that mark seven times. Egbuka caught at least five passes in nine games last season. Harrison did that in 11 games.

Egbuka was originally going to line up as a wideout in 2022 but when Jaxon Smith-Njigba missed most of the season with a leg injury he played the slot receiver position most of the time.

Egbuka said in an interview last season that he and Harrison quickly became friends when they enrolled early at Ohio State and they have dreamed of playing at a high level together. During that interview he also said he thought he and Harrison could

become a better pair of receivers than Justin Jefferson and Ja'Marr Chase were at LSU.

When he was younger Egbuka also was a standout as a baseball player. He won the national championship of the 7-8 year old division of the MLB Pitch, Hit and Run Contest in 2011.

He considered looking for a school that would allow him to play football and baseball but eventually decided with the amount of time required to play major college football he would not attempt to compete in two sports.

TreVeyon Henderson

Henderson was on this list last year but for a very different reason than this year. Last year he was coming off one of the best seasons ever by an Ohio State freshman running back. This season he is on the comeback trail after injuries ruined his sophomore season.

As a freshman, he rushed for 1,248 yards and 19 touchdowns. He gained 277 yards against Tulsa, which was the third-highest total ever by an OSU running back. His 19 touchdowns broke Maurice Claret's OSU freshman record. Last season he was limited to

571 yards rushing and seven touchdowns.

He injured his foot in the third game of last season against Toledo and was not healthy the rest of the season. He averaged 4.8 yards a carry after gaining 6.8 yards a carry as a freshman. Finally in December he had surgery to repair a broken bone in his foot, which had limited his ability to make cuts, a big part of his game.

"I'm just excited to be back. I'm just trying to tune up everything and be the best running back I can be," Henderson said during a preseason interview.

By the end of last season Ohio State was down to two healthy running backs — Chip Trayanum and Dallan Hayden. Evan Pryor missed the entire season because of a preseason injury, Miyan Williams played very little in the last three games and Henderson was injured most of the season.

Now, in a bit of a surprise in the transfer portal era, all five are healthy and have returned to Ohio State.

"You have to compete. When I committed here I knew what I was getting into," Henderson said.

Big Ten East Division preview

Indiana

Last year: 4-8, 2-7 Big Ten, sixth in the East

Coach: Tom Allen (30-40 all at Indiana)

Returning starters: 7 (4 offense, 2 defense, punter)

Players to watch: QB Tayven Jackson, RB Jaylin Lucas, WR Cam Camper, WR Dequece Carter, WR Donaven McCulley, DE Andre Carter, LB Aaron Casey

The big questions: Can the Hoosiers turn a good year in the transfer portal into a good season on the field? Who will be the starting quarterback, Tennessee transfer Tayven Jackson or red-shirt freshman Brendan Sorsby? How healthy is No. 1 receiver Cam Camper, who had surgery for a torn ACL last October? Can defensive end Andre Carter, who had 7 sacks and 13 tackles for losses at Western Michigan last season, reach that level of productivity or close to it in the Big Ten? Will the offensive line, which allowed 38 sacks last season, do a better job of protecting the quarterback?

Maryland

Last year: 8-5, 4-5 Big Ten,

fourth the East

Coach: Mike Locksley (21-28 at Maryland, 23-54 overall)

Returning starters: 10 (4 offense, 5 defense, punter)

Players to watch: QB Taulia Tagovailoa, RB Roman Hemby, WR Jashaun Jones, WR Tyrese Chambers, LB Jaishawn Barham, CB Ja'Quan Sheppard, CB Tarheeb Still

The big questions: Which unidentified SEC school was quarterback Taulia Tagovailoa talking about when he said at Big Ten Football Media Days he was offered \$1.5 million to transfer by one of that league's schools? How fast can the Terrapins rebuild their offensive line after two of last year's starters were selected in the NFL draft and a third lineman signed as an undrafted free agent? Is eight wins the ceiling for Maryland again this season?

Michigan

Last year: 13-1 overall, 9-0 Big Ten, Big Ten champion

Coach: Jim Harbaugh (74-25 at Michigan, 103-46 overall)

Returning starters: 12 (6 offense, 6 defense)

Players to watch: QB J.J.

McCarthy, RB Blake Corum, RB Donovan Edwards, WR Cornelius Johnson, TE Colston Loveland, DT Kris Jenkins, LB Junior Colson, S Rod Moore, CB Will Johnson

The big questions: Can Michigan win the Big Ten East and the Big Ten championship, beat Ohio State and go to the College Football Playoff for the third year in a row? Will running back Blake Corum (1,463 yards last season) be at full strength after knee surgery? Are a healthy Corum and Donovan Edwards the best running back combination in the Big Ten? How big a step will quarterback J.J. McCarthy (2,719 yards, 22 touchdowns, 8 interceptions) take in his second season as the starter?

Michigan State

Last year: 5-7, 3-6 Big Ten, fifth in the East

Coach: Mel Tucker (16-14 at Michigan State, 23-21 overall)

Returning starters: 10 (5 offense, 5 defense)

Players to watch: QB Noah Kim, RB Jalen Berger, RB Jaren Mangham, DT Simeon Barrow, LB Jacoby Windmon, LB Cal

Haladay, CB Charles Brantley

The big questions: Can the Spartans rebound from losing starting quarterback Payton-Thorne and their leading returning receiver Keon Coleman who entered the transfer portal after spring practice? Thorne, who had started MSU's last 26 games, landed at Auburn and Coleman is at Florida State. Who will be the starting quarterback — last year's back-up Noah Kim, red-shirt freshman Katin Houser or incoming freshman Sam Leavitt? Is MSU having any buyer's remorse over that 10-year, \$95 million guaranteed contract it gave coach Mel Tucker? Can the Spartans' defense, which ranked No. 100 nationally overall last year, improve, especially the defensive backfield, which had only two interceptions all season?

Ohio State

Last year: 11-2, 8-1 Big Ten, second in the East

Coach: Ryan Day (45-6 all at Ohio State)

Returning starters: 13 (7 offense, 5 defense, punter)

Players to watch: QB Kyle

McCord, QB Devin Brown, RB TreVeyon Henderson, RB Miyan Williams, WR Marvin Harrison, WR Emeka Egbuka, DE J.T. Tuimoloau, DE Jack Sawyer, LB Tommy Eichenberg, LB Steele Chambers, CB Denzel Burke, S Sonny Styles, S Lathan Ransom

The big questions: Can the Buckeyes beat Michigan? That's the only question for some people in the Buckeyes' fan base who came to expect an OSU win in "The Game" every year after 17 wins in 19 seasons against the Wolverines from 2001 to 2019. Will Kyle McCord or Devin Brown be the starting quarterback and how well will he perform? Will the loser of the quarterback battle stay until the end of the season or transfer? Will an offensive line with three first-year starters solidify early or be a season-long concern? Will Marvin Harrison Jr. be a Heisman Trophy finalist? Can running backs TreVeyon Henderson and Miyan Williams stay healthy? Will the defense solve its problem of allowing too many big plays?

Penn State

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Last year: 11-2, 7-2 Big Ten, third in the East

Coach: James Franklin (78-36 Big Ten, 102-47 overall)

Returning starters: 13 (6 offense, 7 defense)

Players to watch: QB Drew Allar, RB Nick Singleton, RB Kaytron Allen, TE Theo Johnson, OT Olu Fashanu, DE Adisa Isaac, Hakeem Beaman, LB Curtis Jacobs, CB Kalen King

The big questions: Will sophomore quarterback Drew Allar, a former 5-star recruit from Medina, be the elite quarterback Penn State thinks he can be? Can the Nittany Lions compete with Ohio State and Michigan after going 3-9 in their last 12 games against those two teams? Is wide receiver a possible weak point in an otherwise strong

offense? The Nittany Lions are loaded at running back with Nick Singleton and Kaytron Allen, but KeAndre Lambert-Smith, with 24 catches last season, is the only proven wideout.

Rutgers

Last year: 4-8, 1-8 Big Ten, seventh

Coach: Greg Schiano (80-89 overall and at Rutgers)

Returning starters: 13 (5 offense, 7 defense, kicker)

Players to watch: QB Gavin Wimsatt, RB Samuel Brown, WR Naseim Brantley, TE Johnny Langan, DE Aaron Lewis, Mohamed Toure, CB Max Melton

The big questions: Can the Scarlet Knights hope to get close to a winning season unless quarterbacks

Gavin Wimsatt and Evan Simon improve on their stats from last season when they combined to complete only 51 percent of their passes and had 9 touchdown passes and 16 interceptions? Can Rutgers' offensive line protect the quarterback and open holes for the running backs after being far from proficient in those areas last season when the Scarlet Knights scored an average of 17.4 points a game? Can wide receiver JaQuae Jackson successfully make the jump to the Big Ten from Division II California of Pennsylvania, where he caught 77 passes last season? Is Greg Schiano's second attempt to turn Rutgers football around more challenging than the first time?

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Big Ten West Division Preview

Illinois

Last year: 8-5, 5-4 Big Ten, tie for second in the West

Coach: Bret Bielema (13-12 at Illinois, 110-70 overall)

Returning starters: 14 (6 offense, 6 defense, punter, kicker)

Players to watch: QB Luke Altmyer, RB Josh McCray, WR Isaiah Williams, DL Keith Randolph, DL Jer'Zhan Newton, CB Tahveon Nicholson

The big questions: Can Illinois have back-to-back winning seasons for the first time since 2010 and 2011? Will Illinois (8-5 last season) have more than eight wins for the first time since 2007? Will Ole Miss transfer Luke Altmyer become the starting quarterback? Can a running back by committee replace Chase Brown, who rushed for 1,643 yards last season and was a fifth-round draft choice of the Cincinnati Bengals? Can the Illini find replacements for three of their top four defensive backs from last season? How much will the defense miss coordinator Ryan Walters, who left to become Purdue's head coach?

Iowa

Last year: 8-5, 5-4 Big Ten, tied for second in the West

Coach: Kirk Ferentz (186-115 at Iowa, 198-136 overall)

Returning starters: 14 (6 offense, 6 defense, punter, kicker)

Players to watch: QB Cade McNamara, RB Kaleb Johnson, TE Luke Lachey, TE Erick All, WR Nico Ragaini, DE Joe Evans, CB Cooper DeJean

The big questions: Will Michigan transfer Cade McNamara be the quarterback who leads Iowa to the Promised Land or at least to the end zone a few more times than last season when it ranked next to last nationally in total offense? Will Iowa average 25 points a game and save offensive coordinator Brian Ferentz's job? Is tight end Luke Lachey, who led the Hawkeyes in touchdown catches last season, the next in the line of NFL tight ends from Iowa? Is the other tight end Erick Hall, a portal transfer from Michigan, in that same category? Is Ohio State transfer Kaleb Brown the answer to Iowa's search for a receiver who can stretch defenses? Will any Hawkeyes players be

suspended because of the investigation of Iowa athletes gambling?

Minnesota

Last year: 9-4, 5-4 Big Ten, tied for second in the West

Coach: P.J. Fleck (44-27 at Minnesota, 74-49 overall)

Returning starters: 10 (4 offense, 5 defense, punter)

Players to watch: QB Athan Kaliakmanis, RB Sean Tyler, WR Daniel Jackson, WR Chris Autman-Bell, TE Brevyn Spann-Ford, LB Cody Lindenberg, S Tyler Nubin

The big questions: Who will replace the relentless style of running back Mohamed Ibrahim, who left Minnesota as the all-time leader for the Gophers in rushing yards (4,668) and rushing touchdowns (53)? Did the extensive playing time Athan Kaliakmanis got at quarterback last year when starter Tanner Morgan battled concussions prepare him to fill the starting QB's role this season? Can Minnesota get more pressure on opposing quarterbacks after getting only 19 sacks (No. 117 nationally) last season?

Nebraska

Last year: 4-8, 3-6 Big Ten, sixth in the West

Coach: Matt Rhule (0-0 at Nebraska and 47-43 overall)

Returning starters: 15 (5 offense, 7 defense, kicker, punter)

Players to watch: QB Jeff Sims, WR Marcus Washington, TE Thomas Fidone II, TE Arik Gilbert, DE Ty Robinson, LB Luke Reimer, CB Quinton Newsome

The big questions: Will Matt Rhule succeed where Scott Frost, Mike Riley, Bo Pelini and Bill Callahan couldn't and remind people what it was like in the glory days of Nebraska football? The Cornhuskers, who were in the national championship discussion year after year in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, have not won a league championship since 1999 when Frank Solich was coach. Can Nebraska improve defensively after never ranking higher than seventh in the Big Ten in scoring defense during Frost's five seasons as its coach? Can quarterback Jeff Sims stay healthy after playing only seven games in 2022 and eight games in 2021 at Georgia Tech?

Northwestern

Last year: 1-11, 1-8 Big Ten, seventh in the West

Coach: David Braun (0-0)

Returning starters: 8 (2 offense, 5 defense, punter)

Players to watch: QB Ben Bryant, WR Bryce Kirtz, RB Cam Porter, DE Sean McLaughlin, LB Bryce Gallagher, S Jeremiah Lewis, CB Rod Heard II

The big questions: How will the firing of coach Pat Fitzgerald, who until a few weeks ago, looked like he would be the Wildcats' coach for many more years? How will playing an entire season under the cloud of the hazing scandal that got Fitzgerald fired affect Northwestern's players? After going 1-11 last season and 4-20 the last two seasons, would two or three wins be considered a decent season? Will Cincinnati transfer quarterback Ben Bryant, who began his career at Eastern Michigan, win the starting quarterback job? Can Northwestern improve on offense after averaging 13.8 points a game last season?

Purdue

Last year: 8-6, 6-3 Big Ten, first

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in the West

Coach: Ryan Walters (0-0 Purdue, 0-0 overall)

Returning starters: 10 (5 offense, 4 defense, punter)

Players to watch: QB Hudson Card, RB Devin Mockobee, WR T.J. Sheffield, TE Garrett Miller, DE/OLB Khordae Sydnor, S Cam Allen

The big questions: Can Devin Mockobee become the Boilermakers' first 1,000-yard rusher since 2008? Will quarterback Hudson Card, who started three games last year and two in 2021 at Texas, have the big year Purdue is expecting from him? Does Purdue have one of the toughest schedules in the Big Ten, with games against Ohio State and Michigan as two of its crossover games against Big Ten East Division teams? Does Purdue reaching the Big Ten championship game for the first time last season and then seeing its coach Jeff Brohm leave to get \$6 million a year to coach at his alma mater, Louisville, say something about its place in the college football world?

Wisconsin

Last year: 7-6, 4-5 Big Ten, fifth in the West

Coach: Luke Fickell (0-0 at Wisconsin, 64-25 overall)

Returning starters: 14 (7 offense, 7 defense)

Players to watch: QB Tanner Mordecai, RB Braelon Allen, WR Chimere Deke, LT Jack Nelson, DL Rodas Johnson, LB Maema Njongmeta, CB Ricardo Hallman

The big questions: Will quarterback Tanner Mordecai, who transferred from SMU after throwing 33 touchdown passes in 2022 and 39 in 2021, break Russell Wilson's records for touchdown passes in a season (33) and passing yards in a season (3,175) which have stood since 2011? Will Luke Fickell re-energize the Badgers' program, which hasn't played in a Big Ten championship game since 2019 and hasn't won the Big Ten championship since 2012? Will Braelon Allen rush for more than 1,000 yards for a third season in a row?



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