

OHIO STATE 2017 FOOTBALL PREVIEW

Buckeyes

looking for explosive year



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OSU pitches success, future to recruits

By Jim Naveau
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COLUMBUS – Ohio State's 2018 recruiting class is ranked No. 1 in the country and its 2017 freshmen were ranked No. 2.

Next year's recruiting class has two 5-star recruits and 12 4-stars so far and this year's class had two 5-stars and 17 4-stars.



Martell



Okudah



Wade

In Urban Meyer's six years as OSU's head coach, he has had only one recruiting class ranked lower than No. 5 in the country.

So, how do the Buckeyes do it? What started this tidal wave of incoming talent, beginning with the all-world class of 2013, which included players like Joey Bosa, Ezekiel Elliott, Vonn Bell, Darron Lee, Eli Apple, Billy Price and Tyquan Lewis?

And what has kept it going?

Success on the field and in getting players to the NFL obviously has a lot to do with it.

Meyer is a magnetic, some would say charismatic personality. Recruiting coordinator Mark Pantoni directs a 10-person staff which relentlessly identifies, evaluates and pursues the top recruits and gets the Ohio State brand out there, including posting as many as 500 items a week on social media.

And they all emphasize what Ohio State can do for an athlete once his playing days are over.

Here's what some of the top recruits in the 2017 recruiting class said convinced them Ohio State was the place for them.

Jeffrey Okudah, a 5-star cornerback from Texas, said, "What sold me was the plan they had set out for me after football. Not many schools go into that much detail. That really sold me and my family.

"They were pretty close to my family. They did a really good job of recruiting everyone around me. And I knew in my head I wanted to compete with the best players in the country. From the start, that always caught my eye.

"The one thing I liked about Ohio State's coaching staff was the honesty. They never said anything like, 'We'll give you a



Ohio State freshman Brendon White (80) works against Shaun Wade (24) in Ohio State's spring game. White has since switched to safety from wide receiver and wears number 25.

Don Speck/The Lima News

spot.' They knew we knew we'd have to come in and work for it from Day 1," he said.

Tate Martell, a 4-star quarterback from Las Vegas, said, "I knew this was the place for me as soon as I got offered. This is where I wanted to be."

Martell said he felt a connection with Meyer. "I think we both have a passion for football that is second to none. It just felt like a perfect fit for me," he said.

Shaun Wade, a 4-star cornerback from Florida, said, "He (Meyer) does a great job. My

parents love him.

"What sold me was he told me he would help me get a job after football or if I get hurt he would help me get a great job. If they didn't have anybody go to the NFL I would still be here," Wade said.

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A championship season or just close?

Ohio State has talent to win a national title but there are no guarantees

FIVE REASONS OHIO STATE COULD WIN IT ALL

1. J.T. Barrett turns the quarterback clock back to 2014.

Remember the school-record 34 touchdown passes? Remember the two overtime touchdowns at Penn State? Remember him being fifth in the Heisman Trophy voting? If Barrett plays like he did in 2014, OSU could win it all.

2. The defensive line is as good as expected.

Best defensive line in the country is a

label Ohio State has heard. If the Buckeyes front line earns it, they could find themselves in Atlanta on Jan. 8.

3. No letdowns. No injuries. No freak plays.

Pay attention. Stay healthy. Don't get field goals blocked.

4. Urban isn't messing around.

After OSU was shut out 31-0 by Clemson in a College Football Playoff semifinal, it took less than two weeks before it had a new offensive coordinator and a new quarterbacks coach.

5. Bigger, stronger, faster, older.

OSU got to the College Football Playoff with a very young team last season. The ones who came back are a year more

mature physically and mentally.

FIVE REASONS OHIO STATE MIGHT MISS THE PLAYOFFS

1. The offensive struggles could continue.

Maybe 2014 J.T. Barrett is gone and he's not coming back. Maybe the receivers will never live up to their recruiting hype. Maybe Mike Weber still doesn't have breakaway speed. Maybe the lack of offensive line depth will catch up with the Buckeyes.

2. The kicking game

Sean Nuernberger, who was injured last season, was the No. 1 kicker in 2014 but lost his job to a walk-on in 2015. Punter Drue Chrisman was a highly rated recruit but has never been in a college game.

3. Michigan is overdue against Ohio State.

The last time Ohio State went into the Michigan game as a clear favorite and lost was 21 years ago when the Wolverines stunned the Buckeyes 13-9 in Ohio Stadium in 1996.

4. Youthful secondary.

Replacing three starting defensive backs might not be as easy as OSU made it look in 2016. Especially when the three it has to replace this year all were first-round NFL draft choices.

5. Something no one is thinking about.

No one saw a loss to a Penn State team that started its season 2-2 coming when the Nittany Lions beat Ohio State last season.



Jim Naveau
Lima News Sports



Ohio State defensive end Sam Hubbard attempts to sack Indiana quarterback Richard Lagow during a game last year at Ohio Stadium.

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Playoff forecasts start with 'Bama

By Jim Naveau

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Chances are good that a lot of people predicted three of the four teams who eventually got into the College Football Playoff last season.

It wasn't going out on a limb to predict that the two teams in the 2015 championship game, Alabama and Clemson, would return for another round. And it wasn't a surprise to see the 2014 champion, Ohio State, there either.

The only surprise in the semifinals was Washington. So, will this year bring any unanticipated playoff teams? Or will it belong to the tried and true powers of the college game again?

It would not be a shock to see the four College Football Playoff semifinalists come from this list of eight teams: Alabama, Ohio State, USC, Florida State, Clemson, Penn State, Oklahoma and Washington, who have all been near the top of the preseason national rankings.

ALABAMA

Quarterback Jalen Hurt is a year older and a season more experienced. The defense has two returning starters at every level — line, linebackers and defensive backfield. The Tide came within seconds of winning Nick Saban's fifth national championship last season.

OHIO STATE

If the Buckeyes restore the deep pass to their offense and find replacements for three defensive backs who were first-round NFL draft choices, they could be contenders.

USC

The Trojans finished last season on a nine-game winning streak behind redshirt freshman Sam Darnold.

FLORIDA STATE

If Florida State's offensive line, which allowed 36 sacks last season, plays a little better,

quarterback Deondre Francois, running back Cam Akers and others will put points on the scoreboard.

CLEMSON

The big question, obviously, is who will replace Deshaun Watson at quarterback. But, as Ohio State learned, the Tigers can play a little defense, too.

PENN STATE

Quarterback Trace McSorley, running back Saquon Barkley and a good receivers group make the Nittany Lions one of the most explosive offensive teams in college football.

OKLAHOMA

Quarterback Baker Mayfield

is back, but coach Bob Stoops, running backs Joe Mixon and Samaje Perine and wide receiver Dede Westbrook are all gone.

WASHINGTON

The Huskies have quite a bit of talent back from last year's playoff semifinalist team and a schedule that might not be overly challenging until November.



AP Photo
Alabama coach Nick Saban works with his players during NCAA college football practice earlier this month in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

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2016 OHIO STATE LEADERS

PASSING

J.T. Barrett.....	2555
Joe Burrow.....	226

RUSHING

Mike Weber.....	1096
J.T. Barrett.....	845
Curtis Samuel.....	771
Demario McCall.....	270

RECEIVING

Curtis Samuel.....	865
Noah Brown.....	402
Dontre Wilson.....	352
Marcus Baugh.....	269
K.J. Hill.....	262

TACKLES

Raekwon McMillan.....	102
Jerome Baker.....	83
Malik Hooker.....	74
Chris Worley.....	70
Damon Webb.....	57
Dre'Mont Jones.....	42
Sam Hubbard.....	46

TACKLES FOR LOSSES

Jerome Baker.....	9.5
Jalyn Holmes.....	8.5
Sam Hubbard.....	8.0
Raekwon McMillan.....	7.0
Nick Bosa.....	7.0

INTERCEPTIONS

Malik Hooker.....	7
Marshon Lattimore.....	4
Gareon Conley.....	4
Jerome Baker.....	2
Rodjay Burns.....	1
Chris Worley.....	1
Damon Webb.....	1
Damon Arnette.....	1

SACKS

Tyquan Lewis.....	8
Nick Bosa.....	5

FIELD GOALS

Tyler Durbin.....	17/22
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PUNTING

Cameron Johnston.....	46.7
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OHIO STATE SCHEDULE

Aug. 31 – at Indiana, 8 p.m.
 Sept. 9 – Oklahoma, 7:30 p.m.
 Sept. 16 – Army, 4:30 p.m.
 Sept. 23 – UNLV, TBA
 Sept. 30 – at Rutgers, TBA
 Oct. 7 – Maryland, 3:30 or 4 p.m.
 Oct. 14 – at Nebraska, TBA
 Oct. 28 – Penn State, 3:30 p.m.
 Nov. 4 – at Iowa, TBA
 Nov. 11 – Michigan State, TBA
 Nov. 18 – Illinois, TBA
 Nov. 25 – at Michigan, Noon

PRESEASON AP TOP 25

The Top 25 teams in The Associated Press preseason college football poll, with first-place votes in parentheses, 2016 records, total points based on 25 points for a first-place vote through one point for a 25th-place vote, and 2016 final ranking:

	Record	Pts	Prv
1. Alabama (52)	14-1	1513	2
2. Ohio St. (3)	11-2	1414	6
3. Florida St. (4)	10-3	1396	8
4. Southern Cal (2)	10-3	1325	3
5. Clemson	14-1	1201	1
6. Penn St.	11-3	1196	7
7. Oklahoma	11-2	1170	5
8. Washington	12-2	1150	4
9. Wisconsin	11-3	926	9
10. Oklahoma St.	10-3	889	11
11. Michigan	10-3	881	10
12. Auburn	8-5	880	24
13. LSU	8-4	784	13
14. Stanford	10-3	695	12
15. Georgia	8-5	690	-
16. Louisville	9-4	629	21
17. Florida	9-4	624	14
18. Miami	9-4	492	20
19. South Florida	11-2	327	19
20. Kansas St.	9-4	317	-
21. Virginia Tech	10-4	240	16
22. West Virginia	10-3	207	18
23. Texas	5-7	173	-
24. Washington St.	8-5	133	-
25. Tennessee	9-4	114	22

Others receiving votes: TCU 98, Utah 85, Notre Dame 65, Boise St. 37, NC State 26, Northwestern 25, Pittsburgh 23, Oregon 21, Houston 19, Colorado 18, UCLA 9, San Diego St. 9, BYU 5, BYU 4, Nebraska 4, Tulsa 4, Kentucky 3, Texas A&M 3, Michigan St. 1.




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OSU defensive line wants to be best

By Jim Naveau

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COLUMBUS – It didn't get the attention of his spread offense. It wasn't attached to a memorable image, like saying he wanted assistant coaches who coached like their hair was on fire.

But very soon after Urban Meyer was hired as Ohio State's football coach in 2011, he said one of the most important elements in building a great football team was having a strong defensive line.

Seven years later, Ohio State has a defensive line so talented and so deep that it has been called the best in college football.

It is a label both the players and Meyer have embraced.

"We definitely care about that because who wouldn't want to be known as the best defensive line, not only this year but in history," defensive end Tyquan Lewis said.

Lewis, the 2016 Big Ten Defensive Lineman of the Year, surprised some people by returning for his senior year instead of going into the NFL draft.

That decision gave Ohio State four standout defensive ends – Sam Hubbard, Jalyn Holmes, Nick Bosa and Lewis.

Hubbard and Holmes were honorable mention All-Big Ten last season and Bosa had five sacks as a freshman in a season in which he was brought along slowly after ACL surgery his senior year of high school.

"We'll be as good as anybody in America at defensive end," Meyer said during spring practice.

The interior line is good and deep, too, with players like Dre'Mont Jones, Robert Landers and Tracy Sprinkle, a starter until he suffered a season-ending torn patellar tendon injury in the first quarter of last year's opener against Bowling Green. Michael Hill eventually could join them if he returns from a suspension.

It wasn't just players that Meyer recruited to build this impressive front line of the Buckeyes' defense. Since 2014, the line has been coached by Larry Johnson who, like his current defensive line, has also been called the best in the country at what he does.

He has coached seven first-round NFL draft picks at OSU and Penn State and eight of his players have been named Big Ten Defensive Lineman of the Year.

Ohio State defensive coordinator Greg Schiano gives the defensive line and Johnson high grades.

"The defensive line is really good. I think we have the best defensive line coach in America in Larry Johnson. He knows how to keep them all involved. We should never have a tired defensive lineman out there if, God willing, we stay healthy," Schiano said.

Despite all the talk about being the best, Ohio State's linemen say they won't get caught up in it.

"We talk about it in the meeting room and it's more of a motivation thing than hyping up our heads. Coach J (Johnson) says if that's what they're going to say about us then we've got to work and actually achieve it," Hubbard said.



Don Speck/The Lima News

Ohio State defensive end Tyquan Lewis (59) prepares to hit Rutgers quarterback Chris Laviano during a game last season at Ohio Stadium.

Holmes said, "You want praise. I'd be lying to you if I said I didn't care. But at the end of the day you have to know that's just preseason stuff. At the end of the day you want the postseason awards and you don't really care about the preseason stuff."

"I feel like we've been keeping a real humble mind and working to push to be better," he said.

If Ohio State is going to be

the best defensive line in the country, sacking the quarterback is probably the area where it needs to show the most improvement.

OSU's 28 sacks last season ranked seventh in the Big Ten and 58th nationally. Lewis led the Buckeyes with eight and Bosa's five were second.

Those 28 sacks were the lowest total during Meyer's five seasons at OSU an 17 short of

the highest total of his tenure, 45 in 2014. That was two short of the school record of 47.

Schiano offered the theory during a Fox.com interview earlier this year that Ohio State emphasized disrupting the pass rather than hitting the quarterback last season as a possible explanation for the low sack numbers.

Johnson said during spring practice that his defensive linemen just needed to be quicker



Ohio State defensive linemen Jalyon Holmes (11) and Dre'Mont Jones (86) put pressure on Oklahoma quarterback Baker Mayfield during a game in Norman, Okla. last season.



Ohio State defensive end Nick Bosa (97) puts his hands up to try to knock down a pass by Michigan quarterback Wilton Speight during a game last season at Ohio Stadium.



Tyquan Lewis, the Big Ten Defensive Lineman of the Year, rushes Clemson quarterback Deshaun Watson during a College Football Playoff semifinal game last season.

once the ball was snapped to pump up the sacks numbers.

“What you saw is that we weren’t taking that first step fast enough across the line of scrimmage. At the end of the day

we have to get the quarterback on his back. We have to rev up our pass rush,” Johnson said.

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

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Offense still needs playmakers

By Jim Naveau

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COLUMBUS – The search for playmakers at wide receiver is now into its second year at Ohio State.

Ohio State's best receiver last season was running back Curtis Samuel and the deep ball was absent from the Buckeyes' offense in most games.

There were only four receptions of more than 40 yards by OSU players last season – a 79-yard catch against Bowling Green and a 75-yarder against Nebraska by Curtis Samuel, a 47-yard catch by K.J. Hill against Bowling Green and a 43-yarder by Dontre Wilson against Wisconsin.

It's not like Ohio State hasn't tried to address the issue. All six of the players expected to get most of the playing time at wide receiver this season were nationally ranked 4-star recruits and so were the top receivers in this year's freshman class.

So what are the problems? Why haven't the Buckeyes been able to hit big plays in the passing game?

Some people blame quarterback J.T. Barrett. Others say it's the receivers. Receivers coach Zach Smith says it's a combination of a lot of things.

"It's not looking for a deep ball guy, it's looking for the offense to complete deep balls and execute them," Smith said.

"We've had guys get open, we've had guys not get open. The quarterback doesn't make a great throw, the offensive line doesn't protect. Call it the perfect storm," he said.

A perfect storm that produced far from perfect results and might have played a big role in a coaching shake-up that saw Kevin Wilson replace Ed Warinner as offensive coordinator and Ryan Day get the quarterbacks coach job that Tim Beck had last season.

Those changes came not long after Ohio State threw for 86 yards, 124 yards and 127 yards and only one touchdown in its last three games a year ago against Michigan State, Michigan and Clemson.

Here's a look at the Buckeyes' top receivers, their credentials and their production so far:

Johnnie Dixon: He was a 4-star recruit and the No. 9-ranked wide receiver nationally when he signed with Ohio State in 2014. Knee problems have limited him to seven catches in his career, six of them last season.

Dixon, a fourth-year junior, considered quitting football after the Fiesta Bowl, but stayed and was a standout in the spring game.

Binjimen Victor: He was a 4-star recruit and the No. 13-ranked receiver nationally when he signed with OSU in 2016. He had 4 catches for 64 yards and a touchdown last season.



Photos by Don Speck/The Lima News

In a scene seen often last year, Ohio State missed connections in the passing game. Here Terry McLaurin just misses a throw from J.T. Barrett at Michigan State late last season.

Parris Campbell: The Akron St. Vincent-St. Mary graduate was a 4-star recruit who was ranked No. 23 nationally among wide receivers in 2014. All 13 of his career catches came last season. He will be used mostly as an H-back this season.

K.J. Hill: He was a 4-star recruit who was the No. 17 wide receiver nationally in the 2015 recruiting class. He caught 18 passes for 262 yards and a touchdown last season.

Terry McLaurin: He was a 4-star recruit and was ranked No. 35 nationally as a receiver in 2014. All 11 of his career



Binjimen Victor, shown going up for a pass against Clemson in a College Football Playoff semifinal last season, could be a receiver who provides much-needed big plays in the passing game for Ohio State this season.

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Ohio State running back Mike Weber (25) fights for yardage in the Buckeyes' game at Oklahoma. OSU is looking for more big plays from Weber, too.



Parris Campbell (21) warms up before an Ohio State game last season. He is being counted on to be productive in the role Curtis Samuel had in OSU's offense did at H-back last season.



Ohio State quarterback J.T. Barrett avoids the tackle of Indiana's Marcus Oliver during a game last season. Barrett hopes to go out with a big senior year after appearing to struggle at times last season.

catches were last season.

Austin Mack: He was a 4-star recruit in 2016. He was the No. 11 receiver nationally in his class. He caught two passes last season and played on special teams.

Jaylen Harris and Trevon Grimes: The two incoming freshmen were both 4-sar recruits. Grimes, who had ACL surgery as a senior in high school, was ranked No. 6 nationally and Harris was No. 28.



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Worley can play anywhere

By Jim Naveau

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COLUMBUS – Ohio State middle linebacker Chris Worley has a new position this season, which is not really a new story.

Actually, it's an old story that goes all the way back to when he first arrived at OSU four years ago.

The fifth-year senior from Cleveland Glenville started out practicing half the time with the linebackers and half the time with the safeties in his first training camp as part of OSU's outstanding 2013 recruiting class. Since then, he's played all three linebacker positions in Ohio State's defense.

Last year Worley had 70 tackles, 4.5 tackles for losses and an interception in his first year as a starter.

He nearly became a starter two years before that when he battled future first-round draft choice Darron Lee for a spot in the lineup right down to just before the 2014 season opener. Lee kept the job for two years, but Worley's teammates insisted there was not much, if any difference between the starter and the back-up.

When Raekwon McMillan decided to leave OSU after his junior season to enter the NFL draft, Worley was on the move again.

Worley, who once described himself as

“crazy confident” doesn't expect any difficulties getting used to his new position

“It might sound crazy but it's not that much of a transition,” he said. “I'm not where I need to be in my opinion, but I'm not too far off.”

Probably the next most-asked question after that is if he has the size to play middle linebacker at around 230 pounds. Once again, he says that will be no problem.

“I'm about the same size (as last year). There is not too much bulking up you can do. Fifteen pounds is not going to change much. It's really not about size,” Worley said.

Jerome Baker and Worley are returning starters at linebacker. But in Worley's mind, OSU has three returnees at that position because Baker's chance to start came after starter Dante Booker suffered a strained medial collateral ligament in last year's opener and eventually was redshirted.

“We do have to replace Raekwon but technically we have three starting linebackers back from last year,” Worley said. He described Booker as “one of the fiercest competitors I've ever been around.”

“Every year when Coach (Luke) Fickell was here we'd all go over to his house in the summer as a linebackers group. Me and Book would be at his house all day.



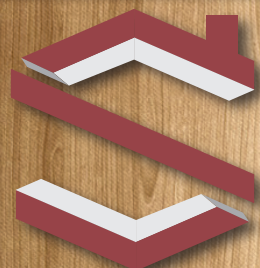
Don Speck/The Lima News

Ohio State's Chris Worley (35) makes an interception in the end zone to stop Michigan State's attempt for a two-point conversion last season in East Lansing, Mich.

We were in the pool wrestling. We were playing half court basketball. We're going to compete until one of us taps out or one of us wins or there is no more time

left.”

Ohio State's linebackers have a defensive line in front of them that is being described as one of the best in the coun-



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If there is a question about OSU's defense, it is if it will be able to replace starters at three of the four positions in the defensive backfield for a second season in a row.

Cornerbacks Marshon Lattimore and Gareon Conley and safety Malik Hooker were all NFL first-round draft choices this year.

Two players seem to have clinched starting spots – returning starter at safety Damon Webb and cornerback Denzel Ward. Transfer Kendall Sheffield, Damon Arnette and freshman Jeffrey Okudah are competing for the other cornerback spot. And Jordan Fuller and Erick Smith are in the running for the start at the other safety position.

“We have a bunch of older guys returning and a lot of young guys who are coming in who look like they're destined to be great,” Worley said. “So it's like once we can figure out the middle part of our team and figure out what type of people they are, it's just going to build up.”

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



Defensive lineman Robert Landers (bottom) and Dre'Mont Jones sack Rutgers quarterback Chris Laviano during a game last season.



Ohio State's defense celebrates after stopping Indiana on a fourth-and-goal situation last season in a game at Ohio Stadium.



Ohio State linebackers Chris Worley (35) left and Jerome Baker (17) combine to sack Michigan quarterback Wilton Speight last season in Ohio Stadium.



Ohio State's Damon Arnette (3) and Denzel Ward (12) celebrate after Arnette's interception against Northwestern last season in Ohio Stadium.

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BIG TEN EAST DIVISION

Indiana

Last year: 6-7, 4-5 Big Ten, fourth in East

Returning starters: 15 (5 offense, 9 defense, kicker, punter)

Players to watch: QB Richard Lagow, WR Simmie Cobbs, WR Nick Westbrook, OT Coy Cronk, TE Danny Friend, LB Tegray Scales, CB Rashard Fant

The big questions: Will IU find a running back to replace Devine Redding, who had back-to-back 1,000-yard rushing seasons in 2015 and 2016? Can quarterback Richard Lagow (19 touchdown passes, 17 turnovers) cut down on bad decisions? With nine returning starters, will the defense be able to build on the dramatic improvement it made last season?

Coach's quote: "We made great improvement last year defensively, from 2015 to 2016. We were not satisfied with that. We want to be a top 25 defense." — Tom Allen

Maryland

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

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

Players to watch: QB Caleb Henderson, OT Damian Prince, WR D.J. Moore, RB Anthony McFarland, DE Jesse Aniebonam, LB Jermaine Carter Jr.

The big questions: Can the Terrapins stop being pushed around by opposing defensive lines and offensive lines after giving up 49 sacks last season and being outscored 121-6 by Ohio State and Michigan? Will a recruiting class ranked No. 18 nationally provide an immediate

upgrade for a team which had a glaring lack of depth in 2016? Who did Maryland make mad at them that its three cross division match-ups are against Wisconsin, Minnesota and Northwestern?

Coach's quote: "I think we're recruiting at a level that will put us in the position we want to be in, which is we're here to win championships. We're here to compete, to win it." — D.J. Durkin

Michigan

Last year: 10-3, 7-2 Big Ten, third in East

Returning starters: 5 (4 offense, 1 defense)

Players to watch: QB Wilton Speight, RB Chris Evans, WR Tarik Black, C Mason Cole, DE Rashan Gary, DT Maurice Hurst, LB Mike McCray, LB Devin Bush

The big questions: Can Michigan add a third season of 10 wins or more in Jim Harbaugh's third season as its coach despite losing 11 players to the NFL draft and having only one returning starter on defense? Is Harbaugh serious that QB Wilton Speight (2,538 yards, 18 touchdowns) will have to compete for the starting job? Can the Wolverines produce a 1,000-yard rusher for the first time since 2011?

Coach's quote: "Young and untalented is bad. Young and talented, that's good. It's a good thing." — Jim Harbaugh

Michigan State

Last year: 3-9, 1-8 Big Ten, sixth in East

Returning starters: 7 (3 offense, 3 defense, punter)



AP Photos

Linebacker Tegray Scales is expected to be one of the leaders of Indiana's defense again this season.

Players to watch: QB Brian Lewerke, RB L.J. Scott, C Brian Allen, WR Hunter Rison, DE Raequan Williams, CB Josiah Scott

The big questions: Is Michigan State still among the Big Ten's elite program or have last season's struggles, combined with off the field legal issues, knocked the Spartans from the ranks of the top teams after 36 wins in three seasons? Is Brian Lewerke the answer at quarterback? Will the Spartans get better line play on both sides of the ball, particularly on defense where they had only 11

sacks.

Coach's quote: "We established ourselves as a championship program inch by inch. There was nothing ever given to us. We have to go back to that mindset and understand that things don't come easy." — Mark Dantonio

Ohio State

Last year: 11-2, 8-1 Big Ten, tie for first in East

Returning starters: 15 (8 offense, 7 defense)

Players to watch: QB J.T. Barrett, RB

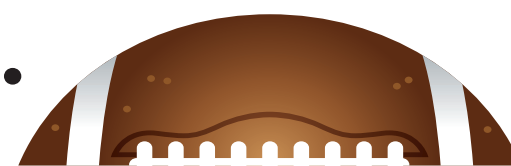
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Heisman Trophy candidate Sequon Barkley looks for running room in Penn State's game against USC in the Rose Bowl.



Michigan State coach Mark Dantonio will be trying to turn the Spartans around after a 3-9 season last year.



Michigan coach Jim Harbaugh talks with quarterback Wilton Speight during last year's Michigan State game.

Mike Weber, C Billy Price, DE Tyquan Lewis, DE Sam Hubbard, DE Nick Bosa, LB Jerome Baker, LB Chris Worley, CB Denzel Ward

The big questions: Will OSU challenge for a spot in the College Football Playoff again? Will J.T. Barrett be the Heisman Trophy contender he was in 2014 or the inconsistent passer he has been at times the last two years? Can Ohio State find some productive wide receivers?

Coach's quote: "I feel extremely strong about the top tier leadership of our team and history shows that usually indicates a good, solid team." — Urban Meyer

Penn State

Last year: 11-3, 8-1 Big Ten, champion Big Ten

Returning starters: 18 (9 offense, 7 defense, kicker, punter)

Players to watch: QB Trace McSorley, RB Saquan Barkley, TE Chris Gesicki, WR DaeSean Hamilton, LB Jason Cabinda, FS Marcus Allen

The big questions: Can the Nittany Lions challenge for a spot in the College Football Playoff? How will they handle being the hunted instead of the hunter? Who will fill the spot of cornerback John Reid (torn ACL)?

Coach's quote: "We think we have a lot of pieces of the puzzle in place. We only had one senior on offense last year and only two seniors on defense, so we were one of the youngest teams in college football." — James Franklin

Rutgers

Last year: 2-10, 0-9 Big Ten, seventh in East

Returning starters: 15 (5 offense, 8 defense, kicker, punter)

Players to watch: QB Kyle Bolin, RB Robert Martin, WR Janarion Grant, OT Tariq Cole, DT Sebastian Joseph, FS Saquan Hampton

The big questions: Is there any way but up to go for an offense which scored one touchdown or fewer in eight games last season? Will receiver/kick returner Janarion Grant, who missed most of last season with a broken ankle, give Rutgers a big play threat? Can the defense, which allowed 37.5 points a game last season, improve?

Coach's quote: "We've pressed the reset button and it's a new team, new focus, new commitment, new energy and we're excited to get going." — Chris Ash



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BIG TEN WEST DIVISION

Illinois

Last year: 3-9, 2-7 Big Ten, sixth in West

Returning starters: 11 (5 offense, 5 defense, kicker)

Players to watch: QB Chayce Crouch, RB Kendrick Foster, WR Malik Turner, WR Mikey Dudek, OT Christian DiLauro, DE James Crawford, LB Tre Watson

The big questions: Will Newark Catholic grad Chayce Crouch stay healthy and have a big season. Crouch played in only four games last season because of a shoulder injury. Can wide receiver Mikey Dudek (76 catches in 2014) come back after tearing the same ACL twice and missing the last two seasons? Can a team with eight scholarship seniors and no recruits rated higher than three stars the last two years improve on last year's three wins?

Coach's quote: "The things you should do, that you need to do that are necessary behind the scenes, we are getting done right now." — Lovie Smith

Iowa

Last year: 8-5, 6-3 Big Ten, tie second in West

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

Players to watch: RB Akrum Wadley, OG Sean Walsh, WR Matt Vandenberg, DE Parker Hesse, LB Josey Jewell, LB Ben Niemann

The big questions: Who will be the starting quarterback and can he improve a passing game that ranked No. 118 nationally last season? Will No. 1 wide receiver Matt Vandenberg be limited after breaking his foot last season and again during spring practice? Can linebacker Josey Jewell have a game day highlight that tops proposing to his girlfriend at Kinnick Stadium this spring?

Coach's quote: "I think all of us as coaches and players feel good about both guys (quarterbacks Nate Stanley and Tyler Wieggers) and feel like they both can lead us to good results." — Kirk Ferentz

Minnesota

Last year: 9-4, 5-4, tied for fourth in



Nebraska quarterback Tanner Lee (13) throws during a preseason practice in Lincoln, Neb. Lee will start this season after sitting out last year following his transfer from Tulane. AP Photos

West

Returning starters: 14 (7 offense, 5 defense, kicker, punter)

Players to watch: RB Rodney Smith, RB Shannon Brooks, WR Rashad Still, DT Steven Richardson, LB Cody Pooch

The big questions: Who will replace four-year starter Mitch Leidner at quarterback? Can coach P.J. Fleck turn Minnesota into an elite program or will his act wear thin if he doesn't? Are Rodney Smith (1,158 yards) and Shannon Brooks (650 yards) the best running back combination in the Big Ten?

Coach's quote: "My job is to bring national attention and national exposure

to the University of Minnesota." — P.J. Fleck

Nebraska

Last year: 9-4, 6-3 Big Ten, tied second in West

Returning starters: 14 (5 offense, 7 defense, kicker, punter)

Players to watch: QB Tanner Lee, WR Stanley Morgan, DE Freedom Akinmoladun, S Kieron Williams, CB Chris Jones

The big questions: Can the Cornhuskers finish what they started, unlike last season when a 7-0 start was followed by four losses in their last six games? Will Tulane transfer pro-style quarterback

Tanner Lee be a better fit for coach Mike Riley's system than Tommy Armstrong? Who will replace three-year starting cornerback Chris Jones, who suffered a season-ending knee injury this summer?

Coach's quote: "Guys are doing what they're supposed to be doing." — Mike Riley

Northwestern

Last year: 7-6, 5-4 Big Ten, tied for fourth in West

Returning starters: 16 (8 offense, 7 defense, punter)

Players to watch: QB Clayton Thorson, RB Justin Jackson, WR Flynn Nagel, OT



Northwestern running back Justin Jackson (21) runs for a touchdown against Pittsburgh during the Pinstripe Bowl. Jackson had 1,524 yards rushing last season.



Iowa linebacker Josey Jewell looks to make a tackle during the Hawkeyes' spring game. Jewell has started 30 straight games and had 124 tackles last season.



Purdue quarterback Jeff Blough passed for 3,352 yards and 25 touchdowns last season for the Boilermakers.

Tommy Doles, DT Tyler Lancaster, S Godwin Igwe-buike

The big questions: Will the Wildcats' first two Big Ten games against Wisconsin and Penn State be make or break games for their hopes of challenging for the West Division title? Can running back Justin Jackson rush for more than 1,000 yards for the fourth year in a row? How much will the passing game miss wide receiver Austin Carr?

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

Purdue

Last year: 3-9, 1-8 Big Ten, seventh West

Returning starters: 16 (5 offense, 9 defense, kicker, punter)

Players to watch: QB David Blough, RB Markell Jones, RB D.J. Knox, DT Golen Robinson, LB Markus Bailey, LB Ja'Whaun Bentley, LB T.J. McCollum, CB Da'Wan Hunte

The big questions: Will a new coach, Jeff Brohm, and a heavy infusion of transfers and junior college players start a turnaround for the Boilermakers, who haven't had a winning record since 2011? Will quarterback

David Blough (25 TD passes, 21 interceptions last year) be able to cut down on turnovers? Will being young and inexperienced on the offensive line spell trouble?

Coach's quote: "Offensive line is very important for us. We have a ways to go there. I do think that we have made improvements." — Jeff Brohm

Wisconsin

Last year: 11-3, 7-2 Big Ten, first in West

Returning starters: 19 (9 offense, 8 defense, kicker, punter)

Players to watch: QB Alex Hornibrook, RB Bradrick Shaw, RB Chris James, WR Jazz Peavy, TE Troy Fumagalli, S D'Cota Dixon

The big questions: With eight starters back from a defense ranked in the top 10 nationally, could the Badgers have the best defense in the Big Ten? Can quarterback Alex Hornibrook increase his production (9 TD passes, 7 interceptions last year)? Is Bradrick Shaw the next in a long line of outstanding Wisconsin running backs?

Coach's quote: "We have a really good senior class, a lot of guys that have played in a lot of big games." — Paul Chryst

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