

2015 FOOTBALL PREVIEW

— OHIO STATE —

# BUCKEYES



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Jim  
Naveau

# The why, why not, of repeating

Only four college football teams have repeated as national champion since the mid-1970s. Can Ohio State do it this season?

## FIVE REASONS OHIO STATE WILL REPEAT:

### 1. The schedule.

Virginia Tech, Penn State and Minnesota appear to be the only opponents who will be even somewhat challenging for Ohio State before late November when it plays Michigan State and Michigan back to back to end the regular season.

### 2. Talent.

OSU has two quarterbacks who could start almost anywhere in the country and another quarterback who could become one of its best receivers. It has a Heisman Trophy candidate running back and a first-round NFL draft choice on the defensive line. The list goes on and on.

### 3. Urban Meyer.

OSU's coach has won three national championships. He has done this before.

### 4. Experience

Ohio State learned what happens if you aren't properly prepared for a game when it lost to Virginia Tech last season. It learned how to play under extreme pressure when just winning the Big Ten championship game wasn't enough, it had to win it big time. And it learned it could beat the big dogs in college football when it knocked off Alabama and Oregon.

### 5. Unselfishness.

For a team that has been the toast of college football since January, OSU has done a good job of keeping the focus on the team, not the individuals. The players have had fun with it but seemed to know where the line they shouldn't cross was, with the exception of the four who will be sitting out the Virginia Tech game.

## FIVE REASONS OHIO STATE WON'T REPEAT:

### 1. The schedule.

Michigan State comes to OSU on Nov. 21 for a huge game a week before the Buckeyes go to Michigan. And that would be followed by the Big Ten championship game and two play-off games.

### 2. Stuff happens.

A turnover at the wrong time, an injury, a suspension or the whole team just not being ready to play against a good, but not great opponent could bring a dream season to a screeching halt.

### 3. Defensive line questions.

Defensive lineman Adolphus Washington disagreed when a reporter at Big Ten media days suggested there were questions about Ohio State's defensive line this season. "Who says that?" Washington asked.

But there are questions about the defensive line. Joey Bosa looks like a first-round NFL draft pick and Washington looks like he has a chance to play on Sundays. But OSU must get a decent pass rush from the defensive end opposite Bosa and Michael Bennett will not be replaced easily.

### 4. The kicking game.

Ohio State's offense was so efficient at getting touchdowns that Sean Nuernberger hitting only 13 of 20 field goal attempts didn't matter last season. He is untested in situations where the outcome of the game depends on a field goal.

### 5. Something no one is thinking about.

Winning it all last year with a third-team quarterback was a surprise. Losing this year could also come from a surprise.

## OSU schedule, preseason polls

### OHIO STATE SCHEDULE

Sept. 7 — at Virginia Tech, 8 p.m.  
 Sept. 12 — Hawaii 3:30 p.m.  
 Sept. 19 — Northern Illinois, 3:30 p.m.  
 Sept. 26 — Western Michigan, TBA  
 Oct. 3 — at Indiana, TBA  
 Oct. 10 — Maryland, noon  
 Oct. 17 — Penn State, 8 p.m.  
 Oct. 24 — at Rutgers, 8 p.m.  
 Nov. 7 — Minnesota, 8 p.m.  
 Nov. 14 — at Illinois, TBA  
 Nov. 21 — Michigan State, TBA  
 Nov. 28 — at Michigan, TBA

### PRESEASON POLL

#### Associated Press

1. Ohio State
2. TCU
3. Alabama
4. Baylor
5. Michigan St.
6. Auburn
7. Oregon
8. Southern Cal
9. Georgia
10. Florida St.
11. Notre Dame
12. Clemson
13. UCLA
14. LSU
15. Arizona St.
16. Georgia Tech
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18. Arkansas
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20. Wisconsin



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# OSU is everyone's target

By Jim Naveau

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COLUMBUS – The last flake of confetti in the postgame celebration had barely settled onto the turf after Ohio State's 42-20 win over Oregon in the national championship game when someone somewhere probably started talking about next year.

Next year is here and the Buckeyes are everyone's No. 1 team in the preseason polls.

The last team to repeat as national champion was Alabama in 2011 and 2012. USC won at least a share of the title in 2003 and 2004. Going back a little more, Nebraska had back-to-back poll championships in 1994 and 1995 and Oklahoma was ranked No. 1 in 1974 and 1975.

Closer to home, Ohio State came up a little short the last two times it had a chance to repeat.

Michigan's legendary upset of the Buckeyes in 1969 derailed OSU's hopes of going back to back after being No. 1 in 1968.

And in 2003, Ohio State lost early to Wisconsin and lost at Michigan when it still might have reached the BCS championship game with a win over its biggest rival. The Buckeyes finished both those seasons ranked No. 4.

With two national championships at Florida (2006, 2008) OSU coach Urban

## TAKING ON HISTORY

- The last time the preseason No. 1 in The Associated Press college football poll won the national championship was USC in 2004.
- The last time Ohio State was No. 1 in the preseason, its 2006 season ended with the loss to Florida in the BCS championship game.

Meyer is not a newcomer to trying to win back-to-back national championships.

The 2007 Gators lost many of the key players from the team which dominated Ohio State 41-14 in the national championship game, finished 9-4 and were ranked No. 13. Meyer's 2009 team was ranked No. 1 all season until a loss to No. 2 Alabama in the SEC championship game. That team finished No. 3 in the polls.

Meyer says holding the national championship trophy again is not something Ohio State is talking about going into this season.

"Repeat is not a conversation," Meyer said during spring practice. At the Big Ten media days in July, he banned another word. "We don't use the word 'defend'," he said.



Don Speck | The Lima News

Coach Urban Meyer leads Ohio State into Ohio Stadium for a celebration of the national championship in January.

Senior offensive tackle Taylor Decker said the idea that this year is a clean slate with no carryover from last season is a theme the coaching staff has emphasized.

"That's over. It's cool but it's done," Decker said about last year's national championship. "Obviously, the spotlight is on us more than ever. People will tell you how great you are but you don't want to start believing all that hype. That can make you believe that just

because we're Ohio State we'll go out and win every game we play."

Maybe that caution is understandable. The last time the preseason No. 1 in The Associated Press college football poll won the national championship was USC in 2004. And the last time Ohio State was No. 1 in the preseason, its 2006 season ended with the loss to Florida in the BCS championship game.

Reach Jim Naveau at 567-242-0414 or on Twitter at @Lima\_Naveau.

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Don Speck | The Lima News

**DEEP THREAT:** Jalin Marshall will be one of the main targets when Ohio State airs it out. Last year Marshall caught 38 passes, six of them for touchdowns

# Offense could get even better

By Jim Naveau

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COLUMBUS — When the All-Big Ten football team as voted by the league's coaches was announced on Dec. 1, Ezekiel Elliott's name was absent.

He wasn't on the first team. Or the second team. Not even honorable mention.

Six week later he was one of the top contenders for this year's Heisman Trophy.

A combination of a slow start by Elliott and an abundance of good Big Ten running backs, like Wisconsin's Melvin Gordon, Indiana's Tevin Coleman, Minnesota's David Cobb and Nebraska's Ameer Abdullah, probably is the best explanation for the snub.



Don Speck | The Lima News

**GOOD HANDS MAN:** Last year's top receiver, Michael Thomas, is back.

But no one is overlooking Elliott this year after a huge postseason meant he ended the season with 1,878 yards rushing,

more than any Ohio State running back except Eddie George's 1,927 yards in 1995.

Elliott rushed for 220 yards in the Big Ten championship game, 230 yards in the Sugar Bowl win over Alabama and carried 36 times for 246 yards and four touchdowns in OSU's 42-20 win over Oregon in the national championship game.

His 696 yards in the postseason were more than Ohio State's leading rusher for the season had in 2004, 1987, 1978, 1971 and every year from 1962-1967.

Ohio State scored 44.8 points a game last season, which was first in the Big Ten and fifth nationally. And the Buckeyes might have the talent to score more points this year.

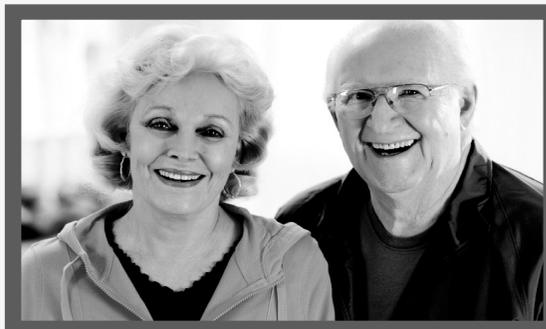
Elliott and whoever plays

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Don Speck | The Lima News  
**STAR LINEMAN:** Ohio State offensive tackle Taylor Decker takes a selfie with the national championship trophy during a celebration at Ohio Stadium in January.



DON SPECK | The Lima News  
**NEW POSITION:** Ohio State hopes Braxton Miller's explosive running ability translates to his new position as a wide receiver.



Don Speck | The Lima News  
**CAN YOU SAY HEISMAN?** Ezekiel Elliott ended the season with 1,878 yards rushing, more than any Ohio State running back except Eddie George's 1,927 yards in 1995. He rushed for 220 yards in the Big Ten championship game, 230 yards in the Sugar Bowl win over Alabama and 246 yards and four touchdowns in OSU's 42-20 win over Oregon in the national championship game.

quarterback, either J.T. Barrett or Cardale Jones, will be operating behind an offensive line with four returning starters from the group that dominated Wisconsin, Alabama and Oregon last year. Guard Pat Elflein was a first-team All-Big Ten selection and tackle Taylor Decker was on the second team.

Barrett was voted first-team All-Big Ten after his brilliant work as an emergency replacement for Braxton Miller. He threw for 2,834 yards and a Big Ten-high 34 touchdowns before a broken ankle in the Michigan

game ended his season.

Then Jones emerged from backup quarterback obscurity to deliver an even more surprising relief effort. He threw for 257 yards, 243 yards and 242 yards and a total of five touchdowns against Wisconsin, Alabama and Oregon.

Whoever wins the starting quarterback job will have lots of targets to throw to, especially when Jalin Marshall, Dontre

Wilson and Corey Smith return after serving a one-game suspension in the opener at Virginia Tech.

Wide receiver Michael Thomas (54 catches, 799 yards, 9 TDs) was last year's leading receiver. Marshall caught 38 passes, six of them for touchdowns and tight end Nick Vannett had five touchdown receptions. Young receivers like Parris Campbell, Johnnie

Dixon, James Clark and maybe Torrance Gibson could get onto the field.

The big question mark is who will replace Devin Smith as the deep threat among the receivers.

That answer could be Miller, who announced a move to receiver after sitting out last

season with a shoulder injury. The two-time Big Ten Offensive Player of the Year as a quarterback has 12 running plays of more than 40 yards in his career. Miller has looked good in practice according to teammates, so an already explosive offense might have just become even more productive.



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Don Speck | The Lima News

Joey Bosa (97) and Adolphus Washington (92) sack Michigan quarterback Devin Gardner. Dominant play earned Bosa unanimous All-America honors and distinction as the Big Ten's Defensive Player of the Year. Washington is considered among the finest defensive linemen in college football. The senior from Cincinnati has been in on 93 career tackles, including 10.5 quarterback sacks.

# Defense strong at every level

By Jim Naveau

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COLUMBUS — It's easy to forget three years later how threadbare the linebacker position was at Ohio State when Urban Meyer arrived in 2012.

Now that position might be one of the strengths of a championship level defense. Now all three units of OSU's defense — line, linebackers, defensive backs — are playing from a position of strength.

During last year's Ohio State national championship run, Darron Lee introduced himself in spectacular fashion in his first season of playing after being redshirted as a freshman. Joshua Perry turned the potential OSU saw in him when it recruited him into production.

And 5-star recruit Raekwon



Don Speck | The Lima News

Talented safety Vonn Bell, a junior from Rossville, Georgia, is one of the top defensive playmakers in college football. Some of his biggest plays have been on the biggest of stages, including an at-the-end-zone interception in the fourth quarter against No. 1 Alabama in the Sugar Bowl, and an interception vs. Wisconsin in the Big Ten title game.

McMillan showed enough in a back-up role to quiet any questions about his ability to step

in as a full-time player at middle linebacker this season.

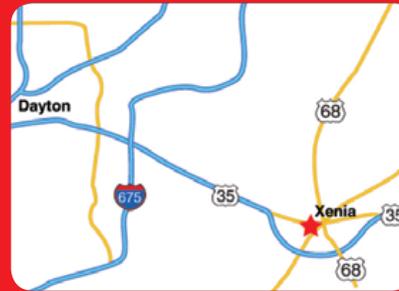
It's quite a change from 2012, and even 2013, when Ryan Shazier was putting up ridiculous numbers (39 tackles for losses, 11 sacks in his final two seasons) and the rest of the linebacker group was several rungs below the future first-round draft choice of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Ohio State was so needy at linebacker in 2012 that Meyer asked senior starting fullback Zach Boren to switch to linebacker during the season, even though he hadn't played the position since high school. And Boren quickly established himself as the second-best linebacker on the team behind Shazier.

Last season, Perry led Ohio State in tackles with 124 and had 8.5 tackles for losses. Lee led the team with 16.5 tackles for losses,

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Linebacker Joshua Perry (37) is No. 1 on the Buckeyes in career tackles (193) and solo tackles (114). The 6-4, 254-pound senior from Galena, Ohio, is a veteran of 39 games and 24 starting assignments. He's coming off a season in which he led the team in tackles.

Don Speck | The Lima News



Don Speck | The Lima News  
Darron Lee was a 15-game starter as a freshman and quickly established himself as a force at linebacker with a 61-yard fumble return for a score in his first game. He was recruited out of the Columbus suburb of New Albany and was named a freshman All-American by USA Today.

was second in sacks with 7.5, was third in tackles with 81, intercepted two passes and returned two fumbles for touchdowns. Even without a starting job, McMillan cracked the top 10 in tackles with 54 and had 6.5 tackles for losses.

The goal this year is to keep on moving forward, Perry says. "We can't have any slip-ups and no steps backward," he said.

Perry called OSU's defense a "no-name" defense in the sense that no one puts themselves first before the team.

But there is no denying the star power of first-team All-

American defensive end Joey Bosa. The junior will be a first-round draft choice next spring if he chooses to enter the NFL draft. He was one of the dominant defensive linemen in college football last season with 13.5 sacks and 21 tackles for losses.

The key to Bosa avoiding double teams and replicating those numbers might be the development of a credible pass rushing threat from the other defensive end. Sophomore Tyquan Lewis will get the first chance at playing that role.

Adolphus Washington will



Don Speck | The Lima News

Raekwon McMillan was the nation's top-rated inside linebacker prospect by ESPN when he was recruited by the Buckeyes. He played in all 15 games for Ohio State as a freshman.

move from nose guard to the position Michael Bennett played last season and could become even more of a playmaker than he was when he had 10.5 tackles for losses and 4.5 sacks in 2014. Senior Tommy Schutt, who arrived as a 4-star recruit but has not lived up to that billing so far, will probably start at the other

interior defensive line position.

The defensive backfield has three returning starters – safeties Vonn Bell and Tyvis Powell and cornerback Eli Apple. Gareon Conley is expected to start at the other cornerback position.

Reach Jim Naveau at 567-242-0414 or on Twitter at @Lima\_Naveau.



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DON SPECK/The Lima News

J.T. Barrett (16) rescued the regular season when he stepped in for the injured Braxton Miller and led the Buckeyes to an 11-1 record. A broken ankle in the Michigan game ended his season.

## J.T. or Cardale? A strong case for each

By Jim Naveau  
jnaveau@civitasmedia.com

COLUMBUS — The question of who will be Ohio State's starting quarterback is the biggest story of the 2015 season for last year's national champions.

But coach Urban Meyer is in no hurry to reveal whether J.T. Barrett or Cardale Jones will start for the Buckeyes. He says everyone will find out when they see who jogs out for Ohio State's first offensive series in its opener at Virginia Tech on Sept. 7.

The back-up quarterback often becomes the most popular player on a football team because no one has seen him play much or have to perform under pressure.

But both the winner and the loser in the battle to be Ohio State's starter will be two of the most popular players on the roster because of what they did on the field.

Barrett rescued the regular season when he stepped in for the injured Braxton Miller and led the

Buckeyes to an 11-1 record. Then, after Barrett went out with a broken ankle against Michigan, Jones was successful beyond all expectations in leading Ohio State to wins in the Big Ten championship game, the Sugar Bowl and the national championship game.

For a while it looked like Ohio State would have a three-way race for the starting quarterback job. But when Braxton Miller decided to move to wide receiver it became a head-to-head duel between Barrett and Jones.

Barrett completed 64 percent of his passes for 2,834 yards and a school-record 34 touchdowns before his injury. He also rushed for 938 yards, including nine games of 70 yards or more.

Jones threw only 17 passes all season before the Big Ten championship game. But in the three postseason games he completed 61 percent of his passes for 257 yards against Wisconsin, 243 against Alabama and 242 in the national championship game against Oregon.

Each brings his own set of strengths to the field. Jones has one of the strongest arms in college football. He is not as good at running the option as Barrett but at 250 pounds he can run over defenders.

Barrett is the better runner and looks more comfortable than Jones when running the option. Meyer questioned his arm strength when he first got to Ohio State but says he is now satisfied with Barrett's ability to "throw a rope" 50 of 60 yards.

Both players say they think there should be a winner emerge from preseason practice as the No. 1 quarterback. A two-quarterback system got a thumbs down from Barrett and Jones.

"I did that in high school. As a quarterback it's kind of tough because you can't get a real vibe off the defense and how they're trying to play you," Barrett said.

Jones said, "I don't think that would be a great idea. I don't think you could get into a

rhythm. But if we do that, I'm pretty sure Coach Meyer would find a way to make it work."

During spring practice, Jones got most of the time with the first team because Barrett was still recovering from the broken ankle he suffered in the Michigan game. But the ankle is back to normal and won't be a factor in deciding who wins the starting job.

Barrett pointed to a time he ran past Joey Bosa during practice as proof his ankle is all the way back.

"I went right around him. I thought I wouldn't have as much giddy-up, but I've still got it," he said.

Meyer called the competition "one of the most refreshing competitions I've ever witnessed."

"This one is very genuine. They really encourage each other, they really push each other," he said.

Reach Jim Naveau at 567-242-0414 or on Twitter at @Lima\_Naveau.



AP Photo

Cardale Jones was successful beyond all expectations in filling in for the injured Braxton Miller and J.T. Barrett. He led Ohio State to wins in the Big Ten championship game against Wisconsin, the Sugar Bowl against Alabama, and the national championship game against Oregon.

### THE CASE FOR J.T. BARRETT

Urban Meyer didn't start Tim Tebow at Florida because he threw the ball perfectly. He picked Tebow because he ran Meyer's offense better. That's Barrett.

### THE CASE FOR CARDALE JONES

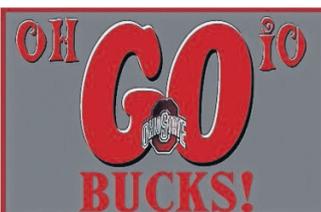
How do you not go with the guy who beat Wisconsin, Alabama and Oregon three weeks in a row? Rotating quarterbacks is a sign of indecision. Neither quarterback is happy with it, and it seldom works.

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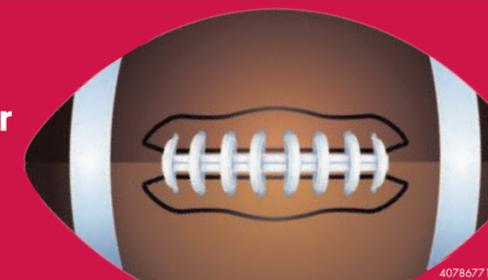


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## BIG TEN EAST DIVISION

### INDIANA

**Last year:** 4-8, 1-7 Big Ten, 7th East Division

**Returning starters:** 13 (6 offense, 5 defense, kicker, punter)

**Players to watch:** QB Nate Sudfeld, RB Jordan Howard, RB Devine Redding, LB T.J. Simmons, FS Antonio Allen.

**The big questions:** Will three solid recruiting years and transfers like UAB's Jordan Howard (1,587 yards rushing last year) be enough to overcome the loss of leading rusher Tevin Coleman (2,036 yards) and leading receiver Shane Wynn (56 catches)? Will the defense, which gave up more than 30 points six times last season, improve enough to take some pressure off the offense?

**Coach's quote:** "If you can't play up front you can't play winning Big Ten football." — Kevin Wilson

### MARYLAND

**Last year:** 7-6, 4-4 Big Ten, 3rd East Division

**Returning starters:** 11 (6 offense, 4 defense, kicker)

**Players to watch:** QB Caleb Rowe, WR Marcus Leak, RB Brandon Ross, CB Will Likely

**The big questions:** Can quarterback Caleb Rowe stay healthy after playing only 13 games his first three seasons? Can the defense, which wasn't stellar last season, be effective with six new starters on the front seven? Will cornerback Will Likely (6 interceptions, 2 for TDs) convince an NFL team to take a chance on a 5-foot, 7-inch defensive back?

**Coach's quote:** "We found out it (Big Ten) is really a lineman's league. You better be able to control the line of scrimmage if you're going to give yourself a chance to win." — Randy Edsall

### MICHIGAN

**Last year:** 5-7, 3-5 Big Ten, tie 4th East Division

**Returning starters:** 13 (6 offense, 7 defense)

**Players to watch:** QB Jake Rudock, QB Shane Morris, RB Derrick Green, LB James Ross, S JabriCB Jourdan Lewis.

**The big questions:** Will Jim Harbaugh look like a miracle worker by the end of the season or will returning Michigan to its former status take a while? Will graduate transfer quarterback Jake Rudock start for Michigan after being Iowa's starting QB last year? Will it be last year's backup Shane Morris? Or will it be someone else? Will safety Jabrill Peppers become a star after injuries limited him as a freshman?

**Coach's quote:** "We're going into a submarine and you won't see us for a while. We'll be working." — Jim Harbaugh

### MICHIGAN STATE

**Last year:** 11-2, 7-1 Big Ten, 2nd East Division

**Returning starters:** 13 (6 offense, 6 defense, kicker)

**Players to watch:** QB Connor Cook, TE Josiah Price, C Jack Allen, DE Shilique Calhoun, LB Ed Davis.

**The big questions:** Will starting two inexperienced cornerbacks and the departure of defensive coordinator Pat Narduzzi to become Pittsburgh's coach make MSU's defense a little less intimidating? Who will replace running back Jeremy Langford, who gained 2,900 yards the last two seasons. Will the Spartans beat Michigan for the seventh time in eight years or is Jim Harbaugh their Kryptonite?

**Coach's quote:** "We've got depth in the offensive line, which is huge in college football." — Mark Dantonio



AP Photo | Al Goldis

Michigan State, coached by Mark Dantonio, is ranked No. 5 by The Associated Press.

#### The Dantonio File

Overall record: 93-48  
Michigan State record: 75-31  
Winning big: MSU has 4 11-win seasons since 2010  
Big Ten champions: 2013  
Top 5 ranking: 2014, 2013  
Big Ten Coach of Year: 2013, 2010



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## OHIO STATE

**Last year:** 14-1, 8-0 Big Ten, 1st East Division

**Returning starters:** 16 (7 offense, 7 defense, kicker, punter)

**Players to watch:** WR Braxton Miller, QB Cardale Jones, QB J.T. Barrett, RB Ezekiel Elliott, WR Jalin Marshall, DE Joey Bosa, LB Darron Lee.

**The big questions:** Can the Buckeyes repeat as national champion? Which quarterback will get the most playing time? Will the high-scoring offense miss coordinator Tom Herman, now the head coach at Houston?

**Coach's quote:** "People have asked me which one (of his three national championships) is better and all that. You can't go there. — Urban Meyer

## PENN STATE

**Last year:** 7-6, 2-6 Big Ten, 6th East Division

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

**Players to watch:** QB Christian Hackenberg, RB Akeel Lynch, WR DaeSean Hamilton, DT Anthony Zettel, DT Austin Johnson.

**The big questions:** Has quarterback Christian Hackenberg (2,977 yards, 12 TDs, 15 interceptions) been over-hyped or did he suffer from having a poor surrounding cast last season? Can an offensive line which allowed 44 sacks last season be fixed?

**Coach's quote:** "The story line last year wasn't Christian Hackenberg, it was all the pieces of the puzzle around him." — James Franklin

## RUTGERS

**Last year:** 8-5, 3-5 Big Ten, tie 4th East Division

**Returning starters:** 11 (4 offense, 5 defense, kicker, punter)

**Players to watch:** WR Leonte Carroo, RB Robert Martin, DT Darius Hamiolton, LB Steve Longa.

**The big questions:** Who plays quarterback? Can Rutgers' defensive line, which is undersized by Big Ten standards, become competitive? Can the Scarlet Knights take advantage of playing four of their first five games at home?

**Coach's quote:** "I have no doubt it (being in the Big Ten) has elevated our recruiting over the last two years." — Kyle Flood



Penn State quarterback Christian Hackenberg (14) talks with tight end Mike Gesicki (88) during a practice. AP Photo

### The Hackenberg File

Games started: 25

Career record: 14-11

Touchdown passes: 32

Interceptions: 25

Top recruit: He was the No. 1 QB recruit in 2013

NFL drought: The last Big Ten quarterback taken in the first round of the NFL draft was Penn State's Kerry Collins in 1995.



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## BIG TEN WEST DIVISION

### ILLINOIS

**Last year:** 6-7, 3-5 Big Ten, tie 5th West Division

**Returning starters:** 15 (7 offense, 7 defense, kicker)

**Players to watch:** QB West Lunt, RB Josh Ferguson, WR Mike Dudek, DE Jihad Ward, CB V'Angelo Bentley.

**The big questions:** Does coach Tim Beckman have to do better than last year's six wins to keep his job? Will accusations of coaches mistreating players from a former player unify or divide the Illini? How soon will receiver Mike Dudek (76 catches last season) be able to return from a spring practice ACL injury?

**Coach's quote:** "I'm focused on the first football game. That is what the team is focused on." — Tim Beckman

### IOWA

**Last year:** 7-6, 4-4 Big Ten, 4th West Division

**Returning starters:** 12 (4 offense, 6 defense, kicker, punter)

**Players to watch:** QB C.J. Beathard, RB Jordan Canzeri, WR Tevaun Smith, DE Drew Ott, CB Desmond King.

**The big questions:** Who are the playmakers on an offense with a first-year starter at quarterback, no running back who had more than 513 yards rushing last year and no receiver who had more than three touchdown catches last season? Will quarterback C.J. Beathard make choosing him over Jake Rudock look like the right move? Would another mediocre season put some heat on coach Kirk Ferentz, even with four years left on his contract.

**Coach's quote:** "We're just worried about playing well this year. That's where our thoughts are." — Kirk Ferentz.

### MINNESOTA

**Last year:** 8-5, 5-3 Big Ten, tie 2nd West Division

**Returning starters:** 17 (7 offense, 8 defense, kicker, punter)

**Players to watch:** QB Mitch Leidner, RB/WR Jeff Jones, DE Theiren Cochrane, CB Eric Murray, CB Briean Boddy-Calhoun.

**The big questions:** Can the Gophers fill the huge hole left in their offense by the departure of running back David Cobb (1,626 yards rushing) and tight end Maxx Williams (8 touchdown catches)? Can Minnesota win 8 games or more three seasons in a row for the first time since 1905? How will the Gophers react to being a contender instead of an underdog?

**Coach's quote:** "I feel like we have as good a secondary as anybody in the Big Ten." — Jerry Kill

### NEBRASKA

**Last year:** 9-4, 5-3 Big Ten, tie 2nd West Division

**Returning starters:** 15 (7 offense, 6 defense, kicker, punter)

**Players to watch:** QB Tommy Armstrong, WR De'Mornay Pierson-El, WR Jordan Westerkamp, DT Maliek Collins, S Nathan Gerry

**The big questions:** Will quarterback Tommy Armstrong improve on his 52 percent completion percentage of last season? Who is going to replace Ameer Abdullah (1,611 yards rushing) at running back? Will new coach Mike Riley's low key personality play better than the vein popping intensity of Bo Pelini did in the pressure cooker of Nebraska football?

**Coach's quote:** "We said we had time for one more big adventure in our life, so here we are." — Mike Riley



AP Photo  
Minnesota quarterback Mitch Leidner threw for 1,798 yards and 11 touchdowns last season. The Gophers hope he can improve on his 51 percent completion percentage from last year.

#### The Leidner File

**Running the Show:** Leidner has run for more touchdowns (17) than he has passed for (14) in his career.

**Family time:** Leidner's younger brother Matt is a back-up center for Minnesota  
Career record: 10-6

**Championship experience:** Leidner won a state championship in high school.

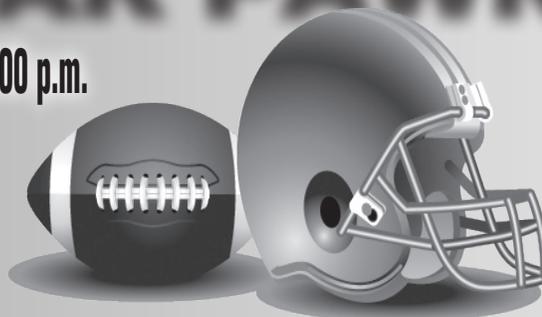
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## NORTHWESTERN

**Last year:** 5-7, 3-5 Big Ten, tie 5th West Division

**Returning starters:** 15 (6 offense, 8 defense, kicker)

**Players to watch:** RB Justin Jackson, WR Christian Jones, WR Cameron Dickerson, DE Dean Lowry, CB Nick Van Hoose

**The big questions:** Can Northwestern bounce back from consecutive 5-7 seasons? Have the offensive line problems of the last two seasons been fixed? Who will be the starting quarterback?

**Coach's quote:** "Over the last two years we've beaten ourselves. And we can't do that. That would be where my focus is now." — Pat Fitzgerald

## PURDUE

**Last year:** 3-9, 1-7 Big Ten, 7th West Division

**Returning starters:** 17 (8 offense, 7 defense, kicker, punter)

**Players to watch:** QB Austin Appleby, WR Danny Anthrop, DT Jake Replogle, CB Frankie Williams

**The big questions:** Which is the real Austin Appleby, the quarterback whose first few starts were good or the the one who struggled late last season? Can experience on the offensive line make up for a lack of experience in the backfield? Does coach Darrell Hazell (4-20 in two seasons) ever wonder why he took this job?

**Coach's quote:** "I think the key to our success this year will be the month of September. We have to get off to a good start." — Darrell Hazell

## WISCONSIN

**Last year:** 11-3, 7-1 Big Ten, 1st West Division

**Returning starters:** 12 (4 offense, 6 defensive, kicker, punter)

**Players to watch:** QB Joel Stave, RB Corey Clement, WR Alex Erickson, LB Vince Biegel, LB Joe Schobert, S Michael Caputo.

**The big questions:** Will Corey Clement (969 yards rushing as Melvin Gordon's backup) find as much running room behind an inexperienced line this year? In Madison, Wis. native Paul Chryst have the Badgers found a coach who will stay around for the long run? Can they find a deep threat at receiver to open up more space for the running game?

**Coach's quote:** "There are players at Wisconsin who know how to win and what it takes to win." — Paul Chryst



Northwestern coach Pat Fitzgerald will try to turn the Wildcats around this fall after back to back 5-7 seasons. AP Photo

### The Fitzgerald File

**Reversing the trend:** Northwestern was 5-7 the last two years after averaging 8 wins a year from 2008-2012.

**Starting young:** Fitzgerald was only 31 when he became Northwestern's head coach.

**Still the kid:** Fitzgerald is still the Big Ten's youngest coach at 40 years old.

**All-American:** He was a two-time consensus All-American linebacker.



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# Eight others in playoff hunt

By Jim Naveau  
jnaveau@civitasmedia.com

A look at some teams other than Ohio State who could challenge for a place in the College Football Playoff:

## ALABAMA

It would be dangerous to count the Crimson Tide out of the national championship picture any season.

Sure, they lost standouts like receiver Amari Cooper and will have a first-year quarterback. But Nick Saban has won two national championships with first-year starters at QB and Alabama's offensive line and defensive front seven remain formidable.

## AUBURN

For a team that lost five games last season, Auburn is being men-

tioned a lot as a possibility to go to the College Football Playoff.

Quarterback Jeremy Johnson is a highly regarded passer and freshman Roc Thomas and junior college transfer Javon Robinson are expected to continue Auburn's tradition of being strong in the running game. The defense could improve with former Florida head coach Will Muschamp's hiring as defensive coordinator.

## MICHIGAN STATE

The Spartans should be favored in every game before going to Ohio State on Nov. 21. Quarterback Connor Cook and an offensive line that could challenge OSU's as the best in the Big Ten could make MSU dangerous. But their path to the playoffs would be blocked by a loss at Ohio State.

## TCU

The Horned Frogs are one of the teams that thought they deserved a spot in the College Football Playoff last year instead of Ohio State. Trevone Boykin (3,901 yards passing, 707 yards rushing) leads an explosive offense.

## BAYLOR

The Bears topped the NCAA total offense statistics last season when they averaged 581.5 yards a game. Baylor coach Art Briles was vocal about his displeasure about being left out of the College Football Playoff, so that could possibly be some motivation for his team this year.

## OREGON

The Ducks' star was dimmed a bit by Ohio State's dominating 42-20 win in the national championship game so they might be



AP Photo  
Alabama coach Nick Saban gives instructions to his players during a practice earlier this month in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

a little overlooked as a national championship contender.

## USC

Quarterback Cody Kessler is the main reason the Trojans are a contender to reach the postseason. He completed a school-record 69.7 percent of his passes in 2014.

## NOTRE DAME

The Irish have a tough schedule and a first-year starter at quarterback, Malik Zaire. But he has a veteran offensive line in front of him and they're solid on defense.

Reach Jim Naveau at 567-242-0414 or at @Lima\_Naveau.

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# Harbaugh makes rivalry burn hotter

By Jim Naveau  
jnaveau@civitasmedia.com

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — It's not all about memories, but Jim Harbaugh certainly has talked a lot about them since he became Michigan's football coach.

He has talked about buying a house in the neighborhood in Ann Arbor where Bo Schembechler lived and about driving the same streets to work as his college coach did. He has talked about growing up there when his dad was a Michigan assistant.

Registering his two young daughters at the same Catholic elementary school he attended and watching them play in the same parks he did as a boy

brought back more memories. "They're wonderful, good memories," he said at the Big Ten media days.

This look back plays well with an audience starved for the kind of success Michigan had from Schembechler's arrival in 1969 until Lloyd Carr's retirement after the 2007 season.

Michigan did not have a losing season in those 39 years. Since then it has had three, including last season's 5-7 record that brought down the curtain on Brady Hoke's four years as coach. The last time Michigan won a Big Ten championship was in 2004.

Harbaugh's mission is to restore Michigan football. And create some new memories.

Making the Wolverines competitive with their two biggest rivals is also part of the mission. Ohio State has beaten Michigan 12 of the last 14 times they've played and Michigan State has won six of the last seven against its in-state rival.

Harbaugh, who was Michigan's starting quarterback from 1984-86, finished third in the 1986 Heisman Trophy voting. He went on to play 15 years in the NFL.

Turnarounds have been one of the trademarks of his coaching career.

Stanford was 1-11 the year before he got there but improved to four wins, five wins, eight wins and 12 wins

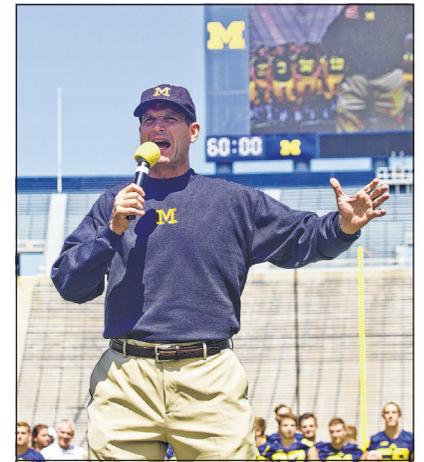
in his four seasons in Palo Alto.

After Stanford, he took over the San Francisco 49ers, who were 6-10 the year before he arrived and had a losing record seven of the eight years before he was hired. The 49ers won 13 games his first season and were in the Super Bowl by his second year.

Harbaugh has claimed more than once he hasn't noticed all the attention and hype that came with his hiring at Michigan. "I haven't seen any circus," he said.

The hope at Michigan is that the circus has left town and Harbaugh will be a difference maker.

Reach Jim Naveau at 567-242-0414 or on Twitter at @Lima\_Naveau.



AP Photo

Michigan football coach Jim Harbaugh introduces his team to fans and media at Michigan Stadium during the team's media day.

## BOOK ON HARBAUGH

**Trademark:** Turning teams around.

**Mission:** Restore tradition

**Up against:** Ohio State has beaten Michigan 12 of the last 14 times; Michigan State has won six of the last seven against its in-state rival.

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