

Defense could have its day

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Following a mass exodus of offensive stars and starting quarterbacks, defense could dominate the Big Ten this season.

Six of the league's top seven quarterbacks from last season, the top three rushers and the two leading receivers are all gone. On the other hand, many top-shelf defensive stars return.

"I always believe championship football starts on defense, and if we're going to make a run at this championship, we're going to have to play outstanding defense," said coach Lloyd Carr of No. 8 Michigan, the preseason pick to win the league title.

The Big Ten will also make big news off the field this season, becoming the first conference to use instant replay to review officials' calls.

The NCAA authorized the conference to use video replay to correct officiating mistakes on a one-year trial basis. Big Ten administrators are quick to point out that its replay system bears no resemblance to that of the NFL's.

The league's coaches say they have been assured the replay system won't cause the long delays that can make the NFL's system so tedious.

The NFL is where you'll find many of the Big Ten's best playmakers from last season.

Wisconsin wide receiver Lee Evans, Michigan State quarterback Jeff Smoker, Purdue wide receiver John Standeford, Michigan tailback Chris Perry and Ohio State quarterback Craig Krenzel all moved on to the NFL, leaving almost every team searching for a go-to guy when it has the ball.

Not to worry, Purdue coach Joe Tiller said.

"Sometimes what's more important than who went out the door is who went in," Tiller said.

Of course, that's easy for Tiller, who'll place his offense in the capable hands of quarterback Kyle Orton, one of the top passers in the country.

2003 STANDINGS

	Conference		Overall	
	W	L	W	L
MICHIGAN	7	1	10	3
Ohio State	6	2	11	2
Purdue	6	2	9	4
Iowa	5	3	10	3
Minnesota	5	3	10	3
MICHIGAN STATE	5	3	8	5
Wisconsin	4	4	7	6
Northwestern	4	4	6	7
Penn St.	1	7	3	9
Indiana	1	7	2	10
Illinois	0	8	1	11

An experienced and talented quarterback is a luxury no other Big Ten contender has.

Michigan fans loved to criticize John Navarre, but adjusting to life without him might be one of the few things holding back the stacked Wolverines.

Matt Gutierrez, a junior with limited experience, is first in line to replace Navarre, ahead of Clayton Richard. And with Heisman finalist Perry gone, the tailback spot is also open in the Michigan backfield.

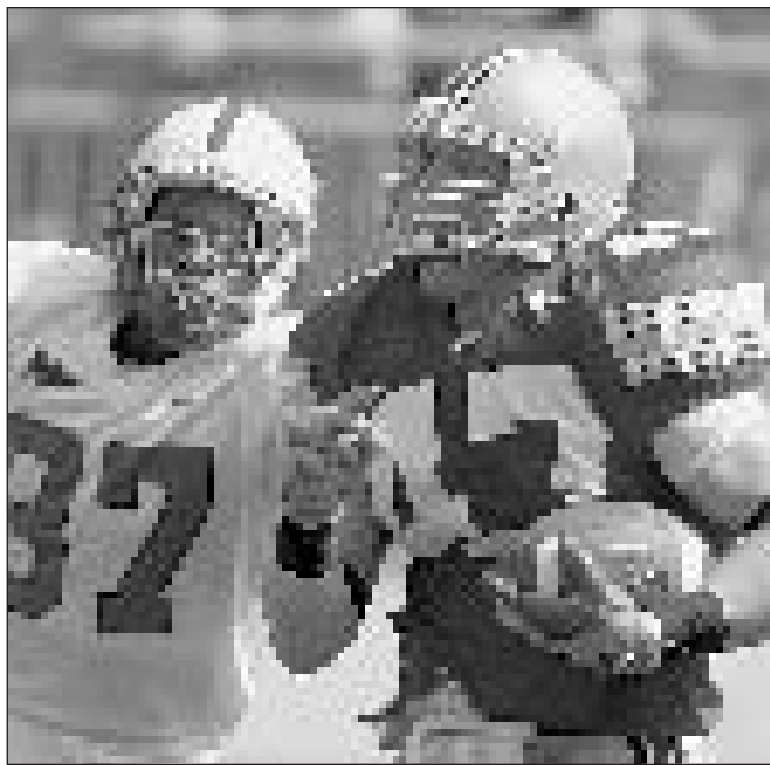
While the offense looks for new leaders, the defense is loaded with linebackers Lawrence Reid and Pierre Woods and defensive backs Ernest Shazor and Marlin Jackson.

Much like their archrivals to the north, the Buckeyes' biggest question lies behind center. Unproven sophomores Justin Zwick and Troy Smith will try to replace the heady and clutch Krenzel. Coach Jim Tressel may take an even more conservative approach — if that's possible — to protect his novice passers.

"We seem like a young group out there, but it's an exciting group that has a lot of talent and lot of passion to become a very good team," Tressel said.

Defense will again be No. 9 Ohio State's calling card with linebackers A.J. Hawk and Air Force transfer Anthony Schlegel, end Simon Fraser and cornerback Dustin Fox leading the way.

The Buckeyes and Wolverines meet Nov. 20 in Columbus and, as usual, expect the Big Ten championship and a spot in the Bowl



The Associated Press

Ohio State linebacker A.J. Hawk (47) races upfield after an interception against North Carolina State.

Championship Series to be at stake.

No. 19 Iowa, No. 21 Wisconsin and No. 25 Minnesota are the teams most likely to keep Ohio State and Michigan from claiming another Big Ten crown — and all of them are breaking in new quarterbacks, too.

The Hawkeyes boast the stellar linebacking duo of Abdul Hodge and Chad Greenway and the Badgers defense is anchored by defensive tackle Anttaj Hawthorne, who might be the league's best NFL prospect.

The Golden Gophers return most of a defense from a 10-win team that wasn't satisfied with its season.

"Last year we won 10 games and we're not that happy about it," coach Glen Mason said. "I know we'll be the best football team in the last seven or eight years at Minnesota."

A capsule look at the teams in predicted order of finish:

MICHIGAN — See Pages 29-30.

OHIO STATE — A record 14 Buckeyes were taken in the NFL draft, leaving Tressel with only nine returning starters from the team that

beat Kansas State in the Fiesta Bowl and finished at No. 4. ... Freshman CB Ted Ginn Jr. is being compared to Deion Sanders and should make an immediate impact.

IOWA — Coach Kirk Ferentz has led the Hawkeyes to a school-record 21 wins the past two seasons. ... QB Drew Tate replaces departed Nathan Chandler. RB Jermelle Lewis steps in for Fred Russell, who gained 1,355 yards last season. But the biggest losses are up front with OT Robert Gallery in the NFL and center Brian Ferentz (the coach's son) out with a spring knee injury.

WISCONSIN — Allowed an uncharacteristic 306 points last year while slogging through a 7-6 season. That's not likely to happen again with eight returning starters on defense. ... A healthy RB Anthony Davis should help new QB John Stocco's transition. Davis gained 682 yards despite missing five full game last season.

PURDUE — Returns just three defensive starters, but the offense should be wide-open again. Orton threw 15 TDs and seven interceptions

as the Boilermakers led the conference in turnover margin. ... The 24th-ranked Boilermakers play Ohio State, Michigan and Wisconsin at home.

MINNESOTA — The Golden Gophers again feature twin 1,000-yard runners, Marion Barber III and Laurence Maroney. Bryan Cupito takes over at QB. ... Minnesota might have the easiest schedule in the Big Ten, with four of the first five games at home and no matchup with Ohio State or Purdue.

PENN STATE — After losing records in three of the last four seasons, including 3-9 last year, the Nittany Lions are looking to bounce back. ... Coach Joe Paterno has 339 wins, second only to Florida State's Bobby Bowden in Division I-A. ... The Nittany Lions are 5-10 in games decided by seven or fewer points over the last three years.

MICHIGAN STATE — See Pages 30-31.

NORTHWESTERN — Wildcats return every starting lineman on both sides of the ball. ... Brett Basanez is one of the few returning starters at QB in the league, but he'll need to be a lot better. He was the ninth-rated passer in the conference and completed only 53.6 percent of his passes in 2003.

ILLINOIS — Hope for a turnaround after a 1-11 season comes from a schedule that starts with four straight home games. Just three seasons removed from a Big Ten title, coach Ron Turner needs to get the Illini back on track. ... QB Jon Beutjer received a sixth year of eligibility because of injuries.

INDIANA — The Hoosiers have 21 starters back, including QB Matt LoVecchio, leading rusher BenJarvus Green-Ellis, WR Courtney Roby and the top four tacklers on defense. Of course, those players lost eight of their last nine games last season. ... For the first time in three seasons, Indiana has 85 scholarship players.