Last year's Big Ten Preview was a discussion about parity in the league, although it would have been better to describe it as mediocrity. While two Big Ten teams played in BCS bowls again last year, the resulting black eye was the same. Ohio State was defeated in another National Championship game and another Big Ten team was soundly defeated by USC in the Rose Bowl. Furls says that 2008 is a "Put Up or Shut Up" year for the Big Ten. And he previews the conference for us in his latest.

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This year is kind of a "Put Up or Shut Up" year for the Big Ten as some of the conference's best teams are playing major intersectional games. Of course Ohio State will play perennial PAC 10 powerhouse USC. Illinois will play the upstart Missouri Tigers led by Heisman Trophy candidate Chase Daniel. Michigan State will play the Cal Bears in Berkeley. Michigan and Wisconsin will both face underrated mini powerhouses Fresno State and Utah respectively. Purdue will host the Oregon Ducks in West Lafayette. The question is, are any of the Big Ten teams good enough to win these match ups and restore the Big Ten's reputation?

The Cellar:

11. Minnesota

Minnesota set the standard for Big Ten disappointment last year, although I am not really sure that the expectations were there for them to really be considered a "disappointment." Not only did the not-so Golden Gophers lose to a Division IAA team (North Dakota State) last year, they also ranked dead last in the nation in defense. Ironically, defeating Minnesota last year has been heralded as an accomplishment for the FAU program, the problem is that they are not in unique company. Minnesota lost to everyone they played last year except Miami (OH).

It was really nice of the Gophers to host a track meet for opposing receivers every Saturday last fall, but it is not very conducive to winning football games. Everyone knew that there was going to be some sort of transition period when Minnesota let Glen Mason go, but I am not sure that anyone anticipated that Brewster's first couple of seasons would be this bad. I expect Minnesota to win three or fewer games, and to continue to play the most porous defense in the country. All of a sudden Mason's mediocre/middle of the pack Gopher teams are beginning to look like the Golden Age of Gopher football.

10. Indiana

I expect a return to normalcy in Bloomington this year. Last year's Insight Bowl berth marked the Hoosiers first post-season play since George Bush's (H.W. not W) presidency. Bill Lynch, who took over after Terry Hoeppner's death, did a good job in stewarding the burgeoning program through last season, but this year the team's galvanization over the death of their beloved coach appears to have faded.

Reports out of Hoosier camp during the offseason indicate that dual threat quarterback Kellen Lewis is wearing on coach Lynch's patience. The details have been sketchy, but this is not the start that the Hoosiers needed to this season. They do catch a break in that they will not face Ohio State or Michigan this year,

but they will get everyone else. Frankly, I think I would rather play Michigan than Illinois or Wisconsin.

9. Iowa

Kirk Ferentz's seat gets hotter this year as the Hawkeyes miss a bowl. Ferentz has been living off the reputation of a couple of very good seasons about five years ago, but what has he done for the Hawkeye's faithful lately? The hallmarks of Ferentz teams are expectations and disappointment. Every year his teams start the season with expectations to compete for third or fourth in the conference and every year they seem to be a middle of the pack team with a .500 conference winning percentage. Actually, they have not even been that good recently. In the last three years Iowa's conference record has been 11-13.

It is no secret to those that carefully follow Big Ten football that Ferentz is one of the most overrated/ overpaid coaches in college football, but it appears as though his troubles this season are not limited to the "on the field variety." The Hawkeyes are leading the Big Ten in one category, arrests . Since April of 2007, the Hawkeyes have had 18 players (current and former) arrested. I am not so sure that this is the vision that Hawkeyes fans had in mind for their program.

On the bright side, the Hawkeyes do return their quarterback Jake Christiansen, their leading rusher Albert Young, and their leading wide receiver Derrell Johnson-Koulianos (who is only a sophomore), but they do have to face the same conference schedule that will foil Indiana's season, the only difference is that Hawkeyes actually get to play the Hoosiers. In the end, it should be a mediocre season in which the Hawkeyes underperform; the more things change, the more they stay the same.

8. Northwestern

The Wildcats finished tenth in the Big Ten last year, and I think it is a pretty safe bet that there will be some pretty significant improvement for them on both sides of the ball this year. The 2008 Wildcats return most of their significant starters, and I think there is a pretty good chance that these guys make a bowl this year.

This year will Pat Fitzgerald's second full year as head coach and his tenacity is already rubbing off on the team. Although the Buckeyes blew them out 58-7 in a game that was not even that close, the Wildcats were pretty competitive in four of their six losses last year, leading Michigan and Iowa both into the fourth quarter. I think this is the year that they breakthrough on the arm of C.J. Bacher and the legs of Tyrell Sutton. If those two can remain healthy then I expect Northwestern to surprise at least a couple of Big Ten teams this year.

The Pretenders:

7. Michigan

First let me make on thing clear. I hate the Weasels, but their success is crucial to the success of the Big Ten. Now with that said, I am not buying the "snake oil" that Rodriguez is selling, at least not this year.

Last year was supposed to be Michigan's year. They were early season favorites (until the first game against App. State) to win the Big Ten and were even supposed to compete for a National Title on the backs of their standouts Manningham, Henne, Hart, and Long. I wasn't buying then, so I certainly am not buying now with all of them gone (along with the entire offensive line). Rich Rodriguez has been successful in the past at a bunch of different schools, but you are never going to convince me that running off most of his offensive line was a

good way to start. I understand the need to change a losing/disappointing culture, but I am not sure that this is exactly what Michigan fans had in mind.

Rodriguez is a system guy, so much so that he succeeded in chasing off last year's #2 quarterback prospect, Ryan Mallett, who ran out of Ann Arbor like his hair was on fire before spring practice even started. A good coach can win games with his system and his guys, a great coach adapts his system to fit guys that are less than ideal. I guess that is Rodriguez's plan, prove his greatness by winning with no players; pretty bold if you ask me, and I think that Rodriguez's offseason of bridge burning absolutely cripples his team this year.

There is an old cliché in football that if you have two quarterbacks, you have none, well right now in Michigan they actually have three, Sheridan, Threet, and the converted freshman safety Feagin, none of whom have really seen any significant play time. Couple this with an offensive line devoid of experience, and there are real issues. Feagin is the most mobile of the three, therefore, I give him the best chance of surviving and I believe that his mobility will be an absolute necessity.

Rodriguez has had a bit more difficulty on the recruiting trail than I think a lot of Michigan fans thought he would. So far he has been unable to really compete with Ohio State regionally for the Midwest's best recruits (aside from Justin Turner) and has already lost one star commit from the 2009 class. Decommits are not rare events, but it is really surprising when a quarterback that fits Rodriguez's system perfectly (Kevin Newsome) decommits. Some of the PC reporting indicates that Newsome wanted to reopen his recruitment to stay closer to home, although some reliable sources are indicating that Newsome may have decommitted after feeling betrayed because Michigan was attempting to recruit a third dual threat quarterback for 2009.

It seems symptomatic of a coach that is used to being the biggest fish in a small pond. In the past Rodriguez could treat recruits however he wanted because the

guys he was going after and landing typically did not have a ton of options. Top ten quarterbacks have lots of options, and don't have to tolerate betrayal. Strap yourselves in Wolverine fans; it is going to be a long ride this season. Michigan could very easily start the season 1-4 and lose all three of its rivalry games (ND, MSU, and OSU).

6. Illinois

furls@theclevelandfan.com : I am standing by for the hatemail right now. Yes the Illini beat Ohio State in the 'Shoe last year. Yes, they were the surprise team in the conference last year, heck, I had the conference runner's up seventh going in to last season, but this is not the same Illinois team. You know what you call Juice Williams without Rashard Mendenhall? Ordinary. Last year Illinois played their best game of the season against the Buckeyes, while the Buckeyes played their worst game of the season.

While the loss of Mendenhall is huge, it is not nearly as big a loss as the Illini will experience on the defensive side of the ball without J. Lehman. Paul Posluszny, Dan Connor, James Laurinaitis have received most of the press in the Big Ten over the last few years at Lehman's expense. All Lehman did was lead the Illini's defense to overachieve for the last two seasons, particularly against Ohio State. Good Riddance.

The Illini also caught a bad break when DT Sirod Williams tore his ACL in noncontact drills this summer. This coupled with Lehman's departure creates a pretty big hole in the Illini defense right up the middle. Now the Illini do have the Big Ten's best WR prospect in Benn, but unfortunately he has Juice Williams throwing the ball to him thus making him a lot more "coverable."

In the end, the on the field losses (and the fact that Ron Zook is still the coach), are going to be too much for the Illini to handle this year, and I see them as a

middle of the pack team.

5. Purdue

I expect the same old same old out of Purdue in Joe Tiller's swan song season. The Boilermakers will put up big numbers against bad teams and bad numbers against big teams, the difference this year for the Boilermakers is two fold; I expect them to win the games they are supposed to (no losses to Indiana this year) and a couple of teams in the Big Ten (Michigan and Illinois) have taken significant steps back.

Purdue quarterback Curtis Painter is drawing heavy praise from the college football punditry as the best pro prospect in the Big Ten this year. He has thrown for nearly 4,000 yards in the last two seasons in Joe Tiller's offense. He has a staggering 1,300 attempts in his three years under center, so I guess he knows the system. He will not make the mistakes that will cost Purdue the games that they are supposed to win. Couple this with a pretty friendly conference schedule and it is clear that this could be the year that Purdue goes to a bowl game in which it does not match up with a MAC team.

In order for the good season that I am predicting for Purdue to become a great season, the Boilermakers are going to have to find a running game. Last year they ranked third from the bottom in the Big Ten running the ball. While the talents of Curtis Painter exhibited in Joe Tiller's passing friendly spread will win a lot of games against inferior Big Ten opponents, in order to play with the Big Boys the Boilers are going to have to balance the offense (at least a little). Purdue has the back to do it in Kory Sheets the question is will they actually commit to running the ball to keep teams out of zone coverage.

4. Penn State

Ranking the Nittany Lions at four seems a bit generous, but in spite of Joe Paterno's flaws, he always seems to get a competitive team out on the field. In football crazed Happy Valley, competitive is not really what the fans are looking for, so needless to say the cries for Joe Pa to step down are getting louder particularly as rumors abound about Greg Schiano as a possible replacement. While all of this seems like some pretty good drama and makes a nice a backdrop for the season, the reality is that as ugly as Penn State is, they still find a way to get it done in the conference (at least somewhat).

While it appears that Paterno's grip on western Pennsylvania recruiting is slipping, there is still a lot of depth on his team. Paterno's defensive line had to be considered the strength of the team at the end of last season with a pair of star defensive ends (Maurice Evans and Josh Gaines) returning, but has since turned into the Nittany Lions biggest question mark.

The Nittany Lions are set on the outside where both of their sack machines return, but they have lost two of their interior run stoppers (Baker and Taylor) who were thrown off the team for misconduct, and they suffered another blow Devon Still went down with a broken leg. Penn State now finds itself in an unenviable position in which the Nittany Lions only have three players to cover a four-player rotation. Good Luck with that, hopefully, Joe Pa can find some depth.

Anthony Morelli is gone, and if you are a Penn State fan then you probably consider that a good thing. Inconsistent and bad in big games are a couple of words that always seem to come up when talking about Morelli. Right now Penn State has two quarterbacks, big time pro style recruit from PSU's 2006 class Pat Devlin and dual threat quarterback Darryl Clark. Paterno is still mum on who will start thus making it really hard to guess what type of offense PSU will be running next year. Will it be like the 2005 spread option or last year's pro set? Not even Joe Pa knows, only his coordinators do!

3. Michigan State

I am looking for Sparty to be this year's version of Illinois. It seems like a huge leap in logic, but bear with me for a second. Last year the Spartans lost five games. In all five losses the margin was one TD or less. They played everyone close.

When MSU fired John L. Smith two years ago, I was ecstatic. As a Buckeyes fan, a strong Big Ten is essential to Ohio State's long term success and John L. was running one the conference's pivotal programs into the dirt. Every year you know that Ohio State and one or two other schools are going to be good, but what really drives a conference is its depth, depth that MSU will now provide under second year head coach Mark Dantonio.

The change in the Spartans program is already evident. Gone are most of the disastrous disintegrations that characterized MSU play during the Smith era. Gone is the late game disinterest. Now MSU's play is best characterized by the 60 minutes of effort on the field.

While effort will get you a trophy in little league these days, effort alone will not get you wins in the Big Ten. Luckily MSU returns most of its team from last year one year older and one year smarter. Javon Ringer will be drawing the bulk of the carries for Sparty's balanced offensive attack, while Brian Hoyer takes the snaps under center. Additionally, MSU returns most last year's solid defense. Remember, that is the same defense that scored two TDs against OSU in last year's game.

2. Wisconsin

Let's get one thing straight, Brett Bielema is not Barry Alvarez. Bielema has a nice team this year (even with the QB controversy), but it is not an exceptional

team. Bielema is still living off his reputation, which was formulated in a magical first season in 2006 when his Badgers went 12-1 while defeating absolutely no one (lost to Michigan, did not play OSU).

Like Penn State, Wisconsin says goodbye to a journeyman quarterback and greets a "quarterback competition" between two unknown commodities. Allan Evridge has to be considered the front- runner in spite of a spring practice session in which he was not able to distance himself from his primary competition, Dustin Sherer. The fact that no one was able to actually win the competition should have Badger fans a bit on edge.

Regardless of who wins one thing is certain, both young quarterbacks will be assisted by a Wisconsin team doing what Wisconsin teams do, run the ball... right up the gut. PJ Hill will return for what seems to be his 12th year of eligibility (surprisingly he is only a junior) and should put up big numbers. Last year Hill dropped a few pounds in an attempt to get quicker, word on the street is that he has put it back on and is looking to go back to his hard nosed ways. Does he remind anyone else of Ron Dayne?

Wisconsin's defense should be good, not great, just good. There are no real holes and no real super stars, just solid all the way around. In year's past this is exactly the type of Wisconsin team that would scare me in Camp Randall, but again, Brett Bielema is not Barry Alvarez, so I am not worried.

THE Contender:

1. Ohio State

No matter how much you hate the Buckeyes you have to admit that they are the

class of the Big Ten (again). Now, what exactly that means, well that will all depend on how the Big Ten does in all those big nonconference games.

The Buckeyes do not have a particularly friendly schedule as they will be forced to play road games in Los Angeles, Madison, East Lansing, and Champagne, but they should be able to sleepwalk through all of their home conference games. The USC game will simply determine whether the Buckeyes play their bowl game in Miami or Pasadena.

The Buckeyes shot at a title will never get better than it is right now. Think about it for a second, how often are three first round draft picks going to forego millions of dollars to comeback and play for free? I am guessing not very often. Last year's team was the team that I called a "season to early." That team was geared and created and ready to compete for a title this year, not last. A shot at a title in 2007 was a gift that the Buckeyes were happy to accept, but this team was always about this year, not last.

Ohio State will be sending 5-6 players into the NFL Draft on each side of the ball next year, and could see as many as 4-5 first round picks. They are as talented and balanced on both sides of the ball as any team that I can remember, but there are still some questions surrounding the team. Will Todd Boeckman play well enough? Beanie Wells alone is enough to win the Big Ten, but probably not enough to win nationally. Will a viable deep threat emerge? The Buckeyes WRs looked good enough to win the Big Ten, can they find someone to stretch better, faster defenses? Will the coaching staff open the playbook up and start using all the weapons? Play action to the TE against an eight man front would be refreshing. Will the Buckeyes defensive line be able to put pressure on the QB while maintaining gap discipline at the line of scrimmage? The answer to these questions will determine whether this is a National Championship series, or just another good season.