

PROVEN PLAYERS

TENNESSEE-CHATTANOOGA

B.J. COLEMAN

This 6-foot-5 Tennessee transfer has started 22 straight games and might be a late-round selection in the 2012 NFL draft. So he's nothing to sneeze at, having thrown for 5,344 yards and 43 touchdowns the last two years. Of course, the same could be said for Florida Atlantic's Rusty Smith in 2009 and Nathan Enderle last year. Both had better teams around them than Coleman will. Neither played worth a lick against Nebraska's stick-like-giue secondary. Still, the kid didn't just fall off the Chattanooga Choo Choo, and if the Huskers choose to get sleepy in week one because of the name on UTC's jersey, Coleman could hurt them.

MICHIGAN STATE

KIRK COUSINS

The Big Ten's best pure pocket passer, the strong-armed, well-spoken senior is expected to keep the Spartans in the hunt for their first Rose Bowl berth since 1987. After that, the NFL beckons. Backed by a good running game, Cousins attacks defenses downfield with deft ballhandling on play-action passes. He can make all throws, too. His signature moment in an 11-win 2010 season was a game-winning drive at Northwestern, where he completed 7 of 8 passes for 98 yards. But he flopped on two big stages — a 37-6 loss at Iowa and a 49-7 loss to Alabama in the Capital One Bowl. Both of those teams had nasty defensive lines that harassed and smacked around the statuesque Cousins. In Bo Pelini's three years at NU, the Blackshirts have tended to eat quarterbacks like Cousins for lunch.

NORTHWESTERN

DAN PERSA

The most athletic of the Northwestern quarterbacks ever to run the Wildcats' zone-read spread offense, Persa threw for 2,581 yards and rushed for 519 last season before rupturing his Achilles tendon in an upset win over Iowa. How he recovers from one of the worst injuries any player can suffer may decide whether Northwestern is bowl-bound in 2011. Revered for his weight-room work ethic, leadership and passing accuracy — a jaw-dropping 70-percent completion rate — the 6-1 Persa is a little Chase Daniel, a little Joe Ganz and a little Todd Reesing. But he's a better runner than all three. If one guy could sneak up and bite Nebraska for a big game, it just might be Persa — if he's fully healthy. Look for coach Pat Fitzgerald to occasionally give Persa a break by using former Nebraska recruiting target Kain Colter as a Wildcat quarterback.

MICHIGAN

DENARD ROBINSON

Robinson tallied 4,272 total yards and 32 touchdowns and placed sixth in the Heisman Trophy balloting — as a true sophomore — but there are still genuine questions about how well he fits into the pro-style offense preferred by new coach Brady Hoke. The 6-foot Robinson was a more efficient passer (62-percent completion rate) than fans might remember, but his real gift is his can't-come-the-guy shiftiness. Tackling this guy is like following a game of three-card Monte run by a street-corner shark. Sometimes you just close your eyes, pray and point to the one in the middle. But almost like a video game character whose "special weapon" bar routinely goes empty, Robinson left several games last year with minor injuries. Big Blue must reduce the wear and tear on him, which means limiting, even to a small extent, DRob's running.

Pryor is out, but other talented quarterbacks await shot at NU

ARMS RACES AND BIG GUNS

In the span of 48 hours last week, the landscape for Big Ten quarterbacks changed significantly. And more change is looming.

Terrelle Pryor left Ohio State's program after NCAA investigations, fierce criticism and rumors finally sunk what was left of his now-controversial career.

Pryor was suspended for five games anyway, but Big Ten defenses undoubtedly feared what the 6-foot-6, 230-pounder brought to the game in versatility, explosiveness and experience. His absence removes a rock-star persona from the league — and some defensive headaches.

On the same day Pryor quit, transfer Russell Wilson — who threw for more than 8,500 yards and 76 touchdowns at North Carolina State — visited Wisconsin. The visit was a "grand slam" according to the Wisconsin State Journal. If Wilson transfers to UW, it's a game-changer for the Leaders Division, the Big Ten and Nebraska, which was already slated to face an impressive lineup of quarterbacks in 2011.

We've separated all 12 opponents into three categories at

quarterback: Proven Players, Promising Potential and Up In the Air — where starting quarterbacks have yet to be chosen. That includes Wisconsin, for now, as Wilson hasn't decided where he'll transfer.

Playing quarterback against the Huskers is one of the more unpleasant jobs in college football. You're facing a pass defense that held quarterbacks to a 48-percent completion rate in 2009 and 2010. One of the nation's best pass-rushing front fours. A complex matchup zone defense that frustrates passers.

In two games, Missouri's Blaine Gabbert never figured it out. Neither did Washington's Jake Locker. Oklahoma's Landry Jones has thrown six career interceptions against NU. In one game, Idaho's Nathan Enderle threw five.

Aside from a few snaps taken by UW's Keith Price in the Holiday Bowl, not one of the opposing quarterbacks on this year's schedule has faced the Blackshirts. Here are their stories heading into 2011:

— Sam McKewon

PROMISING POTENTIAL

FRESNO STATE

DEREK CARR

Ten years ago, the Bulldogs were the premier giant killers in college football, storming into Colorado, Wisconsin and Oregon State for upset wins behind David Carr, the No. 1 overall pick in the 2002 NFL draft. Now sophomore Derek Carr — David's younger brother — is expected to deliver those big wins again. It's a tall order, but Bulldogs coach Pat Hill — his job seemingly on the line each year — has placed full confidence in Derek Carr, who runs a 4.59 in the 40-yard dash to go with his 60-yard arm.

"I'm pretty sure we are going to be throwing it around a little bit more," Carr told the Fresno State Collegian in April. "We've got the wide receivers and the offensive line to do it, and the running backs are good with that spread offense looking at those running lanes."

Carr's first assignment is to beat California at Candlestick Park. Then he travels to NU. In other words, the No. 18 and No. 11 total defenses, respectively, from 2010. Little brother had better pack a lunch.

WASHINGTON

KEITH PRICE

The sophomore-to-be beat out Nick Montana for the starting job with a terrific spring game — 212 yards passing, 53 yards rushing — and, according to Husky coach Steve Sarkisian, "leadership." Price sat behind Jake Locker in 2010, but he threw 37 passes in relief of the oft-injured star. The 6-foot-1, 190-pounder has been in Sarkisian's system for two years, presumably learning from Locker's mistakes. And Price has no shortage of film on Nebraska. The rubber match between the Huskies and Huskers will be fought on NU's turf, but it won't be Price's first rodeo — he started last year at Oregon, completing 14 of 28 passes for 127 yards and a touchdown.

IOWA



JAMES VANDENBERG

Hawkeye fans got their first impressive glimpse of the Keokuk native in 2009, when he replaced an injured Ricky Stanzi and nearly led Iowa to an upset at Ohio State and a Rose Bowl berth. As Stanzi returned for the Orange Bowl win and the 2010 season, Vandenberg returned to his backup seat. But there's no more waiting — and not much depth behind him, either. As Vandenberg throws, so Iowa will go. The 6-3, 220-pounder has all the tools Stanzi did, and that sliver of big-game experience means he won't come into the starting job cold. And by the time Nebraska sees Vandenberg, he will have started 11 games. "I think you had a pretty good football player being behind another pretty good football player," Iowa coach Kirk Ferentz said of Vandenberg. "We're all excited to see James perform this year."

MINNESOTA

MARQUEIS GRAY

Gray could be the most athletic Golden Gopher, but he also may be one of the league's best wide receivers, catching 42 passes for 587 yards as a sophomore in 2010. New coach Jerry Kill's spread-option attack seems to fit the 6-4, 209-pound Gray's skill set, though, and Kill let Gray take all the No. 1 snaps in spring practice. But Kill hasn't given Gray the starting job yet, dangling the possibility of 6-6 true freshman Max Shortell of Shawnee Mission, Kan., competing for the job when he arrives for fall camp. Gray will certainly be on the field somewhere — and it's probably at quarterback.

UP IN THE AIR

WYOMING

EMORY MILLER JR. AND BRETT SMITH

Want to know how thin the Cowboys' quarterback depth chart is? One backup is a walk-on wide receiver who wears No. 88. And he's from New Hampshire. That's what happens when a two-year starter — in this case Austyn Carta-Samuels — transfers from a non-BCS school. Redshirt freshman Miller and true freshman Smith — sounds like a law firm — are completely green, but they provide dual threats for Cowboys coach Dave Christensen, who once coordinated Missouri's offense. The 5-11 Miller operated a spread offense in Mesquite, Texas.

The 6-2 Smith ran one in Oregon. The job could be shared at first, but Smith, who rushed for 855 yards his senior season, should eventually get the nod.

PENN STATE

ROB BOLDEN OR MATT MCGLOIN

Joe Paterno turned heads when he tabbed true freshman Bolden as his starter just before the 2010 season opener. In losses to Alabama, Iowa and Illinois, the 6-4, 208-pounder struggled. After suffering a concussion midway through the Minnesota game, he was replaced by McGloin, a fiery, fearless walk-on who hadn't thrown a pass all year. Paterno's second gamble paid off. The 6-1, 209-pounder from Scranton threw for 13 touchdowns and four interceptions in 5½ regular-season games. Bolden recovered from his concussion but didn't get his starting job back. So he tried to transfer. Paterno wouldn't let him.

Bolden then chose to battle McGloin for the job. They'll head into the fall still fighting for it. Blue-collar Lion fans have thrown their lot behind McGloin, but Bolden has more tools. He needs confidence — and time. There were moments during his freshman campaign when he looked like a natural at the position. Paterno is unpredictable with quarterbacks. He may try door No. 3 or No. 4 — Paul Jones or Kevin Newsome — by the time Nebraska rolls into town.

OHIO STATE

BRAXTON MILLER, KENNY GUITON OR JOE BAUSERMAN

Miller, the top-rated dual-threat quarterback in the 2011 recruiting class according to Rivals and Scout, is a big talent. Is he ready? And will interim coach Luke Fickell — who gets one year to audition for his dream job — really entrust his future to the 6-2, 185-pound true freshman who's bound to take some lumps? The 6-1, 220-pound Bauserman — a 26-year-old senior who played minor league baseball — is the safer choice. He's a journeyman type, but OSU has won a lot of games with guys like Craig Krenzel and Todd Boeckman. Guiton is an intriguing story, a dual-threat signal-caller from Texas deemed too slight by some Big 12 schools for a scholarship. Guiton chose OSU over ... Prairie View A&M. He's in Columbus because he's smart enough to run Jim Tressel's pro-style attack. None of the three — not even Miller — possess Terrelle Pryor's upside. But if the Buckeyes survive NCAA investigations without a significant purge, one — or all three — will be in command of a very talented team.

WISCONSIN

JON BUDMAYR OR RUSSELL WILSON (PICTURED)

We'll start with Wilson. He's taken visits to Wisconsin and Auburn. If he chooses to play at UW, he'd clearly be the starter — and a Big Ten game-changer. The Badgers immediately become the favorites for the Leaders Division crown — and perhaps the entire Big Ten. He's only 5-11, and he'll miss some throws. He's not the classic Wisconsin quarterback. But Wilson makes a lot of "wow" plays. If Wilson chooses Auburn — or just sticks with minor league baseball — the 6-foot, 195-pound Budmayr is the front-runner. He's short and slight, but he has a big arm — and some wheels to go with it. But he had a poor spring game — 10 for 23 passing with two turnovers. The running game always comes first at Wisconsin. Budmayr is a good fit. But the Badgers could use a dynamic player to wrest control of the Big Ten away from Ohio State. Wilson could do it.

