

Big 12 football preview: Top returners, additions and too-early power rankings

By JUSTIN WILLIAMS

The Big 12 is a new-look conference yet again thanks to the departures of Texas and Oklahoma and additions of Arizona, Arizona State, Colorado and Utah.

Sixteen teams — eight added in the past two years — four time zones, zero divisions and ample storylines. With the 12-team College Football Playoff format beginning this year and a league that, on paper, has the potential to be chock full of parity, it sets up what could be fascinating races for the conference title and Playoff spots.

With spring practice wrapped and the spring transfer window shut, let's take stock of the Big 12 with a stab at too-early power rankings, key returning players and additions, staff changes and an assessment of each team heading into the summer.

1. Kansas State

Last season: 9-5 (4-6-3)

Key returners: Avery Johnson (QB), DJ Giddens (RB)

Key additions: Dylan Edwards (RB), Easton Kilty (OT)

Johnson showed a ton of promise as a true freshman in 2023, appearing in eight games and being named MVP of the Pop-Tarts Bowl. He made highlights with his legs, and K-State should feast on the ground offensively with Giddens and Edwards in the backfield. Johnson will need to progress as a passer, and without leading receivers Ben Sinnott and Phillip Brooks, who are both off to the NFL, A Wildcats defense that led the Big 12 in turnover margin last season and returns most of its starters should be stout enough to keep Kansas State's title mix so long as Johnson continues his ascent.

2. Utah

Last season: 8-5 (5-4 Pac-12)

Key returners: Cam Rising (QB), Brant Kuithe (TE)

Key additions: Dorian Singer (WR), Alakai Gilman (S)

Even Utah's most significant returning players will feel like new additions in 2024. Rising, back for his seventh year, appears on track after missing all of the 2023 season with a knee injury. Same for Kuithe, an all-conference performer in 2021 who hasn't played since midway through 2022, and running back Micah Bernard, who appeared in two games last season. Honestly, if not for Rising's injury history, I would have put the Utes in the top spot. If he and his offensive running mates can stay healthy, bolstered by the addition of Singer, Utah should be an immediate force in its new conference.

3. Kansas

Last season: 9-4 (5-4)

Key returners: Devin Neal (RB), Cobee Bryant (CB)

Key additions: Rai Bojbe (edge), Shane Bumgardner (C)

Similar to Utah, quarterback health is the biggest question for Lance Leipold and the Jayhawks. Jalyn Daniels is back if he stays healthy. Kansas should be a contender. The backfield combo of Neal and Daniel Hishaw Jr., plus the addition of tight end DeShawn Hamka, should give new offensive coordinator Jeff Grimes a lot to work with. Brian Borland's defense made notable strides in 2023 and brings back Bryant, a lockdown, first-team all-conference cornerback while nabbing jobs in the spring window to help replace fifth-round draft pick Austin Booker.

4. Arizona

Last season: 10-3 (7-2 Pac-12)

Key returners: Noah Fitza (QB), Tetairoa McMillan (WR)

Key additions: Jacory Croskey-Merritt (RB), Chubbua Mabe (DT)

Zona fans are already sick of hearing this, but there's a chance the Wildcats would have been the Big 12 favorites if Jedd Fisch didn't leave for Washington. Credit to Brent Brennan for keeping key pieces, including Fitza, McMillan and cornerback Tacario Davis, among others. But Arizona will still have to reckon with the adjustments and attrition of a late-cycle coaching change, including double-digit transfers following Fisch to Washington. Brennan did bring in intriguing reinforcements in the backfield (Croskey-Merritt and Quail Conley) and on defense (Mabe, Tre Smith, Keaton Darton). Navigating the transition to a new coach and league is significant, but the Fitza-McMillan connection should help that process along.

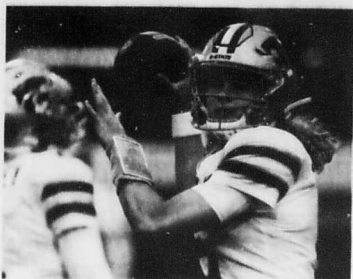
5. Iowa State

Last season: 7-6 (6-3)

Key returners: Rocco Becht (QB), Abu Sama III (RB)

Key additions: Kenard Snyder (DE), Jalen Travis (OL)

Tin bullish on the Cyclones. Iowa State walked a path similar to Oklahoma State last year, opening the season in uninspiring fashion with a roster weakened by a gambling sting. But then the Big 12's best defense was joined by a promising offense. Becht's ascendance as a redshirt freshman was encouraging, along with the explosive news of Sama, averaging 7.3 yards per carry



Quarterback Avery Johnson, who appeared in eight games for Kansas State last season, returns to lead the Wildcats offense in 2024. K-State has two quality running backs but needs Johnson to sharpen his passing skills. **BRAD SCHMIDT**
—Associated Press

as a true freshman. The Cyclones also return all five starters on the offensive line and the top three pass catchers at receiver. That return production — hope in the country at 86 percent, according to ESPN's Bill Connelly — carries over to a defense that allowed just 5.2 yards per play and returns first-team all-conference safety Jeremiah Cooper and leading tackler Beau Freyer.

6. Oklahoma State

Last season: 10-4 (7-2)

Key returners: Ollie Gordon II (RB), Colin Oliver (LB)

Key additions: Kobe Hylton (S), AJ Green (RB)

Too low? After a disastrous start to last season, Mike Gundy and the Pokes corrected course and rode Gordon all the way to the Big 12 Championship Game. The Doak Walker winner is back in 2024, as is seventh-year quarterback Alan Bowman and wideouts Brennan Presley and Rashod Owens. So are a bunch of others on a roster that returns 21 starters and 85 percent of its production from 2023. But the passing game needs to be more explosive and the defense needs to clean things up in the back end, which it should ideally do in its second season under defensive coordinator Bryan Nardo. There's not a ton of size to the Cowboys, but they've already proven what they can accomplish with a heavy dose of Gordon. If Oklahoma State can augment that in 2024, it will be right back near the top of the standings again.

7. UCF

Last season: 6-7 (3-4)

Key returners: RJ Harvey (RB), Kobe Hudson (WR)

Key additions: KJ Jefferson (QB), Penny Boone (RB)

Too high? UCF seemed to suffer massively from being a first-year power conference team last season, one that had the talent to jump out to early leads but fizzled too many games away in the second half. I expect a year of experience and some additional depth will help on that front, with Gus Malzahn recruiting well in the portal and the high school ranks. The pieces for offensive potency are in place, with Jefferson and Boone joining Harvey, Hudson and a unit that averaged better than 7 yards a play in 2023. Some of that is leaning on a change of scenery aiding Jefferson's depth of experience, and the team did take swings on players defensively such as Nyajik Kelly and De-shawn Pace. If enough of those chances pay off, the Knights could contend.

8. West Virginia

Last season: 9-4 (6-3)

Key returners: Jahiem White (RB), CJ Donaldson Jr. (RB)

Key additions: TJ Jackson (DL), Jaden Bray (WR)

Respect is hard to come by for the Mountaineers, though this is more than they get from me and everyone else last season, when the team was picked to finish last in the Big 12 preseason poll. West Virginia responded by winning nine games that earned head coach Neal Brown an extension. Granted, it did feel like smoke and mirrors at times, but success is often seized opportunity, and West Virginia deserves credit for capitalizing on close games and an advantageous schedule. Quarterback Garrett Greene is back at the helm along with a dynamic backfield of White and Donaldson, but new contributors will have to emerge on the offensive line and in the defensive secondary for the Mountaineers to be in the title race again.

9. Texas Tech

Last season: 7-6 (5-4)

Key returners: Tuhj Brooks (RB), Behren Morton (QB)

Key additions: Micah Hudson (WR), Vinny Scuary (OL)

Tech's dark-horse ambitions never materialized in two under head coach Joey McGuire, but the Red Raiders did win four of their last five. The hope is that momentum will carry over, along with the return of Brooks and Morton and the addition of Hudson, a five-star wide receiver and prized in-state recruiting win. The defense was solid in 2023, but the offense will need to be better. Brooks was second in the conference

in rushing behind only Baylor, but Tech ranked near the bottom in most passing categories and scored only 27 points per game. Morton is the clear starter after Tyler Shough departed via the portal. If the red-shirt junior can elevate (and stay healthy), Texas Tech can be competitive.

10. TCU

Last season: 5-7 (3-4)

Key returners: Trey Sanders (RB), Savion Williams (WR)

Key additions: Bless Harris (OT), Devaan Deal (edge)

The Frogs were painfully average across the board in 2023 after their magical 2022, but the argument for improvement includes a full season with a better and more experienced Josh Hoover at quarterback as a red-shirt sophomore, and the addition of former Boise State head coach Andy Avalos as defensive coordinator. The team did lose continuity in the trenches, including defensive tackle Damonic Williams in the spring transfer window, and Hoover missed spring practice with an undisclosed injury. A lot is riding on his health and development.

11. Colorado

Last season: 4-8 (1-8 Pac-12)

Key returners: Shedeur Sanders (QB), Travis Hunter (CB/WR)

Key additions: Samuel Okunola (DE), Jordan Seaton (OL)

Depending on how optimistic you are about Colorado and coach Deion Sanders, the Buffs are probably the last of these teams where one could rationalize conference tie hopes. But it would require exponential strides from a season ago, when Colorado's white-hot start fizzled into a 1-8 finish. The team does have arguably the best quarterback (Shedeur Sanders) and one of the top playmakers (Hunter) in the league, and it added a ton of portal talent on both sides of the line of scrimmage — areas that were major problems last season. But a wholesale turnaround will likely require Shedeur to perform like a top-five NFL Draft pick, and a much cleaner pocket. With all the noise, attention and roster turnover that accompanies Colorado, there's also the possibility that it becomes too much and the bottom falls out. Either way, we'll all be watching.

12. Cincinnati

Last season: 3-9 (1-8)

Key returners: Dontay Corleone (DT), Corey Kiner (RB)

Key additions: Brendan Sorsby (QB), Jared Barlett (TE)

At the very least, Cincinnati should be better in year two under coach Scott Satterfield. Granted, that's not saying much considering a last-place finish in 2023, but had quarterback play and a dreadful secondary were the main culprits to the Bearcats' struggles, and both of those areas have been addressed. Sorsby

comes from Indiana via the portal to join Kiner, leading receiver Xavier Henderson and all five starters on the offensive line. Former Iowa State linebacker coach Tyson Veidt is the new defensive coordinator for a unit that added seven transfers to the backfield and will look to lean on Veidt's experience in the conference.

13. BYU

Last season: 5-7 (2-7)

Key returners: Tyler Batty (DL), Jakob Robinson (CB)

Key additions: Gerry Bohanon (QB), Jack Kelly (LB)

We have a full-on quarterback competition in Provo between Bohanon, who transferred from USF, and junior Jake Retzlaff. Bohanon brings experience and depth to a major question area and a position riddled with injury and inconsistency in 2023. The offense needs to be better in all areas, finishing last in the Big 12 in yards per game and yards per play. The defense wasn't overly impressive, either, but should benefit from a second season under coordinator Jay Hill.

14. Baylor

Last season: 3-9 (2-7)

Key returners: Dominic Richardson (RB), Caden Jenkins (CB)

Key additions: Dequan Finn (QB), Ashlyn Hawkins (WR)

Head coach Dave Aranda's hot seat is already set to broil after a disastrous 2023 season. Aranda, a former standout defensive coordinator, is taking over play calling on defense and has a new offensive coordinator in Joe Spavital. Baylor hopes an offense record can recapture the program's top-five, league-title-winning form of 2021. Finn, a dual-threat quarterback and the reigning MAC Player of the Year for Toledo in 2023, will look to spark a team that was dead-last in scoring offense and defense and finished second-to-last in both yards per play and yards per play allowed among Big 12 teams last year.

15. Arizona State

Last season: 3-9 (2-7 Pac-12)

Key returners: Cam Skattebo (RB), Shamari Simmons (QB)

Key additions: Cole Martin (DB), Rakeek Brown (RB)

The Sun Devils, still reeling from the Herm Edwards experiment gone awry, have a major unknown at quarterback. They could go with Michigan State transfer Sam Leavitt or recently added Jeff Sims, who struggled at Nebraska last season and is now on his third school. This is the same team that shuffled through four different QBs last year and even had Skattebo attempt 15 passes. Head coach Kenny Dillingham seems to have a workmanlike rebuild plan in place and support behind him, but patience will be key in Tempe. This could take a while.

16. Houston

Last season: 4-8 (2-7)

Key returners: A.J. Hankley (S), Donovan Smith (QB)

Key additions: Malik Carr (TE), Corey Platt Jr. (LB)

Houston received high marks for the hire of Willie Fritz from Tulane, but Fritz also needs time to get things humming at a power-conference level in depth and talent, particularly after the usual coaching-change exodus. Smith missed spring ball with an injury but is back at quarterback after starting all 12 games in 2023, as is sophomore running back Parker Jenkins. Fritz also added Louisiana quarterback Zeon Chris, who should push Smith, along with 25 other transfers to a roster that ranked near the bottom in the Big 12 in most offensive and defensive categories last year.

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