

# Episode 22: Bateman is back for the Gophers

In this episode of "The Weekly Rundown," our staff discusses Rashod Bateman's return and what both the Gophers offense and defense might look like in the upcoming season.

**Nolan O'Hara and Brendan O'Brien**

## OPENING MUSIC PLAYS

**NOLAN O'HARA:** Hello, and welcome back to another episode of the 'Weekly Rundown' presented by the Minnesota Daily. I'm your host Nolan O'Hara. We're sorry we missed you last week, but make sure to check our website [mndaily.com](https://mndaily.com) for anything you missed and all things Gopher sports. With football set to kick off less than a month away, we're going to jump into what the roster might look like this season. So, today I'm joined with our football beat reporter, Brendan O'Brien. How's it going, Brendan?

**BRENDAN O'BRIEN:** Other than suffering through another Twins loss, I'm doing pretty well. Nolan. How are you?

**O'HARA:** You know, suffering through that loss as well. I wish I wouldn't have watched that game, it was a fun eighth inning, but we're still surviving here.

**O'BRIEN:** Yep, got some football to talk about, so we're doing pretty well there.

**O'HARA:** Exactly, got some football to talk about. So, let's start with the big news with football. As of yesterday, Rashod Bateman is back for the Gophers. If you're unaware, Bateman opted out earlier this summer, citing concerns over COVID-19 and he decided to prepare for the NFL Draft. But when the Big Ten announced that its fall season was back on, Bateman returned to campus, enrolled in classes and made it known he wanted to play for the Gophers this season.

But there was a catch. Brendan, you had the breakdown for us yesterday. Can you explain the situation and what happened yesterday that allowed Bateman to return for the Gophers?

**O'BRIEN:** Yeah, so once Bateman announced that he was going to forego his last season at Minnesota and enter the NFL Draft, he did sign with an agent, which would make him ineligible per NCAA rules. So, what he needed in order to be able to come back to Minnesota and play was get NCAA approval. He couldn't just re-enroll in classes and start practicing again with the Gophers. So, he did get that approval and that was announced yesterday. Just another thing of note is that with his return comes a little bit of change. He decided that he's going to switch from his jersey number of 13 to number zero, with the zero representing a zero tolerance for racism in Minnesota's culture and just society as a whole.



O'HARA: For sure and Bateman's return will not only help himself, but also help the Gophers' offense. He was one of the best receivers in the country last season and it'll be good to see him back for the team. Brendan, you recently wrote a breakdown about the offense and what that's going to look like, what we can expect from the Gophers this season. Who are some of the key returners and who can we expect to take a step up this year? And do you think the offense will look as dynamic, similar as it was last year?

O'BRIEN: Sure. So, one of the main starters obviously that's coming back is quarterback Tanner Morgan. And that's going to be a big piece to keeping continuity going and continuing to put points on the board as the Gophers did last year. He did really well and basic metrics for the Gophers, breaking some single season records and some advanced metrics that that Pro Football Focus measures as well. So, it's great to have him if you are a Gophers fan. Another receiver obviously besides Bateman is Chris Autman-Bell. He was the No. 3 receiver but now with Tyler Johnson moving on to the NFL, Autman-Bell looks to probably be Morgan's second man in the receiving corps. The biggest thing for Morgan besides having these receivers will also be having a great run game to lean on. He's got Muhammad Ibrahim who's a redshirt junior as well who's had some experience and shared the backfield with Rodney Smith and Shannon Brooks, who are now gone.

So, Ibrahim looks to become the focal point of the running game, but that doesn't necessarily mean he will be the only one that'll be in the backfield for the Gophers this year. At a recent press conference, P.J. Fleck also mentioned guys like Bryce Williams, who had played in 2018, but was redshirted in 2019. He's obviously had some experience, so he'll most likely get some snaps as well. But if you're looking for a three headed backfield like they had last year, it's really up for grabs for that third spot. There's some other redshirt freshmen in Cam Wiley and Treyson Potts. The interesting thing is that Fleck noted that Potts is not only a good running back, but he's also good in the receiving game. He also mentioned guys like Jason Williamson, the Owatonna native, and also true freshman Ky Thomas, which obviously we will get into a little bit later with other players that are further down the depth chart and true freshmen may be stepping up. But that's kind of what the backfield looks like.

Obviously, Bateman coming back is huge for a quarterback's confidence and making sure that he has that go-to-guy, that security blanket on the offense. And they've got a lot of rotating parts, about seven guys who could step in on the offensive line who have all had game experience and should also do a good job of getting some holes open for the backs and just protecting Morgan in general.

O'HARA: Lots of returners. Talk about Ibrahim, he's a guy who in the last media availability, Tanner Morgan, P.J. Fleck were saying that he's kind of stepping up as a leader and is going to lead that running backs room, what are your expectations of him this year?

O'BRIEN: Morgan and Fleck have said about him being a leader. And the one thing that you always see watching him is that he brings a ton of energy. One thing to note too is that given his size, 5'10," 200 pound running back, he's not necessarily the biggest running back, but he runs with a lot of energy and he's willing to take defenders head on too. So, I expect a lot of that from Ibrahim and Gophers fans should expect that as well.

O'HARA: For sure. A lot of the roster is pretty similar from last year on the offensive end, but it's not really the case on the defensive side of the ball. They lost a lot of guys to the NFL Draft or graduation. You wrote another breakdown about the defensive side of the ball, who's going to step up and fill the roles left with Antoine Winfield gone, Kamal Martin, Thomas Barber, Carter Coughlin. Who's going to step up and replace those guys this season?

O'BRIEN: Yeah, so starting up front on the defensive line, two guys of note are Ezezi Otomewo, sorry if I mispronounced that, and Boye Mafe. Both are edge rushers, defensive end types. Mafe has had a lot of praise from Fleck in this most recent press conference. Not only has he – in Fleck's words – paraphrasing that he has mastered the technique at the position now and he's not just learning but he's almost perfecting his craft at the position, and that he's really just an instinctual player with a lot of energy. So, look for Mafe to have an expanded role. Both he and Otomewo had experience last season, just maybe weren't playing quite as much with the likes of Carter Coughlin or Winston DeLattiboudere. In the linebacker position, Braylon Oliver, Mariano Sori-Maren and potentially Thomas Rush are some guys to look out for. They could step up as well.

Some of these guys have played in 13 games, just didn't necessarily start in any of them. Oliver did have 22 tackles over 13 games. And then Sori-Maren had 42 tackles with seven starts and he kind of stepped in when Kamal Martin was injured as well. And then looking in the defensive backfield, obviously losing a player like Antoine Winfield Jr., who arguably was the Gophers best defensive player last season. It's not going to be easy for the Gophers to replace him, but they still have guys who have played defensive back and it might not be necessarily a safety stepping up and in that defensive backfield it might be a cornerback. Guys like Coney Durr, Benjamin St-Juste, Jordan Howden. Those are guys who have had plenty of experience as well. Calvin Swenson last year was right behind Winfield on the depth chart. And so we'll see whether or not he was just behind Winfield and if someone else will kind of step in over him or if he'll take on that starting role.

O'HARA: For sure, they definitely have a lot of depth that can fill in for some of these guys who have graduated like Antoine Winfield, who might not even have been the best defensive player, but the best overall player for the Gophers last season. And they might need depth in this unusual season. Some of the Big Ten protocols call for 21 days if there's any positive COVID tests, which could present challenges for teams. I know P.J. has talked about that a little bit about how guys need to be ready at a moment's notice. What has he said about the team's depth and that next-man-up mentality?

O'BRIEN: Yeah, he really did emphasize that any guy that's really low on the depth chart could really quickly jump up on the depth chart depending on who ends up testing positive if there are any players testing positive. And then obviously, with a normal season just the regular injuries that players might go through. We'll see if that's just coach-speak or if players from all over the depth chart and all different kinds of experience will in fact step up. But I have an inkling that given what he's said and looking at their roster, that you might not necessarily see a ton of true freshmen and really young guys playing right away unless if they are really the talented guys that have earned those spots. I think we look at the Gophers roster, and especially on the defensive side of the ball you think of guys like Coughlin and Barber and Martin and Winfield and you think that there's a lot of guys that they'll need to replace, but they still have players who are in either redshirt sophomore, redshirt juniors and even redshirt seniors. And they're still here, they just haven't had as much experience because of those other players. So, it probably will take some other guys to step up. And Fleck did mention that it's still a real season, so they're going to need plenty of guys to step up.

O'HARA: For sure. And especially if there's any kind of COVID test it could wild being three weeks, I mean there's eight games this season and you could miss three of them just with one positive test. So, they're definitely going to need some depth this season along with every other team in the Big Ten or college football really. So, it'll be an interesting year and it'll be fun to see who kind of steps up on the defensive side and see if the offense can keep it tight as much as they did last year after losing some guys like Tyler Johnson and Rodney Smith. I think that's all that we had for you today, but appreciate you tuning in. And Brendan, thank you for joining us.

O'BRIEN: Yeah of course. Thank you, Nolan.

O'HARA: Have a good one.

OUTRO MUSIC STARTS

O'HARA: In other news: the Gophers athletics department conducted 2183 COVID-19 tests in the month of September, finding 55 positive test results. The Gophers women's basketball team added Alana Micheaux to its 2021 recruiting class. Another highly ranked commit for Whalen. Next week, we'll have an update on the status of three Gopher sports cut by the athletics department pending Board approval. Join us next week for the "Weekly Rundown" of all things Gopher sports.