If the names in this year's Best Director race look familiar, they should: They've been here before.

With the exception of "Argo"'s Ben Affleck, the top competitors are a group of men (and one woman) who know their way around the Dolby Theatre, with 14 Best Director nominations and five wins between them.

And they're threatening to turn this year's race into a rare showdown between four past winners -- just as the DGA Awards will pit Affleck against four past champions with seven wins between them.

The past-honors roll includes the four directors who joined Affleck in receiving DGA nominations: Steven Spielberg of "Lincoln," with six previous Best Director nominations (and seven others in different categories) and two wins in the category; Tom Hooper of "Les Miserables," who won for "The King's Speech" two years ago; Kathryn Bigelow of "Zero Dark Thirty," who took home the director and picture honors the year before for "The Hurt Locker"; and Ang Lee of "Life of Pi," who won for Brokeback Mountain in 2006.

Also in the top 25 of the rankings on the Gold Derby charts of projected winners in the category: past winners Robert Zemeckis (he won for "Forrest Gump" and released "Flight" this year), Peter Jackson ("The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King"/"The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey"), Sam Mendes ("American Beauty"/"Skyfall") and Steven Soderbergh ("Traffic"/"Magic Mike").

Former Best Director champs Woody Allen and William Friedkin also released movies in 2012, but nobody's kidding themselves that "To Rome With Love" or "Killer Joe" are in the Oscar mix.

Of the top 10 directors on the Gold Derby chart (which also includes David O. Russell of "Silver Linings Playbook," Quentin Tarantino of "Django Unchained" and Paul Thomas Anderson of "The Master"), only Affleck and Michael Haneke ("Amour") haven't been nominated for Best Director.

Affleck, though, won an Oscar for writing "Good Will Hunting," while Haneke's film "The White Ribbon" was a Best Foreign-Language Film nominee for Germany three years ago.

You have to go all the way down to the 12th-ranked director, Benh Zeitlin of "Beasts of the Southern Wild," to find a complete newcomer to the Oscar stage.

If the experts' predictions hold and the DGA nominations are an accurate barometer, we're looking at a lineup of nominees that will include four past Best Director winners. That'd be the heaviest lineup of past winners in 28 years, since former winner Milos Forman was named Best Director at the 1984 Oscars over a field that also included past champs Woody Allen, David

Lean and Robert Benton.

And that year tied with 1959 as the only years in Oscar history in which four past winners were competing against each other in the category.

In fact, for 66 of the last 83 years in which they've given out Oscars (I don't count the first year, when it was impossible to nominate any past winners), the lineups of Best Director nominees have featured no former winners, or only one. Only 10 times in those eight decades have two past winners competed against each other; only five times have three been doing so, and only twice have four of the five nominees already had statuettes at home.

It's instructive to note that from 1967 through 1976, a period widely viewed as the golden age of American cinema, only two past winners made the cut in 10 years -- the rest were all newcomers, including Sydney Pollack, Federico Fellini, Peter Bogdanovich, Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Roman Polanski, John Cassavetes, Robert Altman, Sidney Lumet, Friedkin and Forman.

And the past two decades, while not quite as stingy with returnees, have nonetheless been a time for first-timers: Between 1994, when past winners Robert Redford and Woody Allen were up for the award, and last year, when Allen and Martin Scorsese were, the Best Director field went 16 years without ever having more than one returning winner. (Seven of those years, it had none.)

So if you like to see vets returning to the scene of their former glory, relish this year’s race. We probably won't see its likes again for some time.

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