2011 Spring Football position breakdowns: Running Backs (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

Entering this spring, the major concern with the Iowa running back situation is depth.

If there is good news though, it appears the Hawkeyes have their feature back for the 2011 season in sophomore Marcus Coker.

Coker made his first appearance for Iowa last season in the Hawkeyes' 45-0 win over Ball State. This came a week after former running back Jewel Hampton tore his ACL in a loss to Arizona. Coker would remain behind Adam Robinson on the 2-deep until Robinson suffered a concussion during the Hawkeyes' win over then-No. 5 Michigan State.

The Beltsville, Md., native made his first career start for Iowa back on Nov. 6 against Indiana, and did fairly well by rushing for 129 yards on 22 carries. Coker would go on to start in three of the Hawkeyes' final four games, with his most recent outing being by far his best. In the 2010 Insight Bowl against Missouri, Coker rushed for 219 yards on 33 carries and two touchdowns, leading Iowa to a 27-24 victory.

Now nearly eight months after breaking his collarbone in the early portion of the 2010 fall camp, Coker sits atop the depth chart as Iowa's No. 1 running back. Barring anything unusual happening between now and September, he should be starting for the Hawkeyes against Tennessee Tech in the 2011 season opener.

This is the good news for Iowa. Everything else regarding the

backfield gets a little tricky.

As of March 23 when the Hawkeyes held their first of 15 spring practices, junior Jason White was listed behind Coker on the 2-deep at running back. White, who has shuffled between offense and defense throughout his Iowa career, ended up getting the bulk of the carries for the Hawkeyes last spring due to injuries with all three of Iowa's featured backs at the time – Hampton, Robinson, and Brandon Wegher.

The third running back right now is redshirt freshman De'Andre Johnson, a guy who got a lot of reps during the Hawkeyes' open practice at Kinnick Stadium last August shortly following both the departure of Wegher and the collarbone injury to Coker.

Now Iowa did address running back depth in recruiting this past year, as the Hawkeyes managed to sign four different backs to letters of intent. The two most publicized players at the position both hail from Illinois – Rodney Coe, who is listed at 6-3, 238 pounds, and Mika'il McCall, who comes in at 6-0, 215 pounds. The other two running backs brought in were Damon Bullock and Jordan Canzeri. Bullock is listed at 6-0, 195 pounds, while Canzeri is at 5-9, 172 pounds.

Basically, the question of who emerges on the depth chart behind Coker at running back will be one that's easier to answer when the season gets closer.

Running back isn't the only area of concern at the moment, either. Iowa will have to find a replacement at fullback for Brett Morse, who graduated after starting three seasons at the position for the Hawkeyes. The job would appear to belong to sophomore Brad Rogers, if/when he is able to return to the gridiron.

Rogers, who did make one start at fullback for the Hawkeyes in a game against Michigan, missed the Insight Bowl due to heart issues. As a result, he is not participating in any drills this spring. At his press conference on March 23, head coach

Kirk Ferentz said there was no timetable for when Rogers would be able to return to the field.

Listed behind Rogers now on the 2-deep is junior Jonathan Gimm, who is listed at 6-3, 240 pounds.

Again, some things appear set with the backfield, but there are still some questions that will need answering, some of which won’t be answered until later in the year.