

2011 Spring Football position breakdowns: Offensive Line (premium)

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The Iowa Hawkeyes entered their spring practices back on March 23 with a few uncertainties. One of the few areas with significant questions, however, comes in a vital area – offensive line.

Iowa lost two starters from last season's squad to graduation in Julian Vandervelde and Josh Koeppel. Vandervelde started all 13 games at left guard for the Hawkeyes in 2010, while Koeppel started the last five games, including the 2010 Insight Bowl against Missouri at right guard. Koeppel ended up switching to right guard after James Ferentz beat him out as the starting center last fall, but the bigger loss is Vandervelde, who was a three-year starter along the offensive line for the Hawkeyes.

Aside from that, everyone else along the line returns and easily makes this the biggest strength Iowa has going into 2011.

Ferentz has an entire season as a starting center under his belt and will be a junior this fall. The Hawkeyes also return both tackles – senior right tackle Markus Zusevics and junior left tackle Riley Reiff. Zusevics started all 13 games along the right side of the line for the Hawkeyes in 2010, while Reiff did the same along the left side.

A pair of sophomores whose names Iowa fans might want to get acquainted with now are Conor Bofelli and Brett Van Sloten.

Bofelli is listed behind Ferentz at center, but could potentially see the field sooner playing at either guard position. Meanwhile, Van Sloten is listed behind Zusevics at right tackle.

The big question up front is with the two guard positions. The 2-deep released at the start of the spring had senior Adam Gettis and sophomore Nolan MacMillan listed first string. But there are a few others in the mix for some reps this spring as well in senior Woody Orne and redshirt freshman Brandon Scherff.

Gettis entered last fall as a starter, but an injury kept him off the field and allowed MacMillan to start each of the Hawkeyes' first six games before he got hurt and ended up making two appearances as a reserve the rest of the way. As for Gettis, he did start Iowa's contests against Wisconsin and Michigan State.

Barring significant injury, Gettis and MacMillan should both likely remain atop the 2-deep come August when the Hawkeyes open fall camp. The question then would be whether these two can stay healthy and hold those positions down. Gettis was someone the coaching staff was extremely high on last spring.

Again, this is the one area that offers the most stability, and that could pay dividends in a season like the one Iowa will have breaking in a quarterback with only two starts to his name, as well as a running back with only four career starts. The questions at the two guard spots might not be completely answered by August, but the fact that the front-runners both have some experience to go with the three cornerstones along the line is significant.

It's not a question of how good the offensive line can be, but rather how much better can it be from 2010.