

2011 Spring Football position breakdowns: Defensive Line (premium)

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In 2010, the defensive line was a strength for the Iowa Hawkeyes. They returned all four starters from a team that won the Orange Bowl, including a defensive end in Adrian Clayborn that opted to return for his senior season rather than head to the NFL a year early.

Led by Clayborn, Christian Ballard and Karl Klug, Iowa was the most observed part of the defense last season. The results weren't what any of them had in mind, but it was still a key to the Hawkeyes' success.

Now all three of those guys are gone. Clayborn and Ballard will likely be the first two Hawkeyes to be selected later this month in the 2011 NFL Draft.

Replacing a combined 152 tackles and 12 sacks from 2010 will be a major challenge, but there was one smart thing Iowa did with the defensive line last season that will help pay dividends in 2011.

Defensive tackle Mike Daniels proved worthy of being "the fifth starter" along with the aforementioned three players and defensive end Broderick Binns. Ballard was a player who proved he could play either position along the line. In 2008, he started at defensive end because the Hawkeyes had Mitch King and Matt Kroul. In 2009, he moved inside to tackle so Binns could see the field as a sophomore.

Ballard started every game last season, but not all at one

position. The five games he started inside at tackle, Binns got the starting nod at defensive end. When Daniels got the opportunity to start at tackle, Ballard moved back outside to end for the other eight games. So even though Iowa only had four defensive linemen maximum on the field at any one time, there were always five guys that could start any given Saturday depending on the circumstances.

The reason this pays off for the Hawkeyes now is because both Binns and Daniels are seniors and both are going to have the first opportunities to start every game in 2011 at their natural positions on the defensive line. So even though Iowa is taking an enormous hit losing three proven commodities in Clayborn, Ballard and Klug, the Hawkeyes are in better shape now than they would be had Daniels not started a single game or had any sort of significant impact a year ago.

Daniels returns from a season where he recorded 40 tackles, 11 of which were for a loss of yards, and four sacks. Binns played in 12 of Iowa's 13 contests last year (he was suspended for the opener against Eastern Illinois) and finished 2010 with a total of 36 tackles.

As far as filling the other two spots along the defensive line, senior Lebron Daniel appears to be in good shape to take over at the end position held by Clayborn the past three years. Last season, Daniel had six tackles, a sack, and a fumble recovery. Meanwhile, the tackle spot held by Klug the last two years is the position that is the unknown of sorts. Senior Thomas Nardo was listed first string on the 2-deep that came out at the start of spring practice, and he is listed at 6-3, 277 pounds.

One thing to expect would be plenty of rotations, because even if the Hawkeyes end up starting four seniors in Binns, Daniels, Nardo and Daniel when the season begins in September, they'll want to get some playing experience for others along the defensive line so it's not a bigger concern in 2012.

Names to keep an eye on include junior Steve Bigach, who is currently out this spring due to injury, senior Joe Forgy, sophomore Dominic Alvis, and redshirt freshman Carl Davis, who right now is listed behind Nardo on the 2-deep.

Defensive line isn't the most glaring concern, but the production Iowa gets beyond Binns and Daniels is a question that will continue to be asked until there are two linemen that clearly show between now and August they belong on the field.