

2011 Spring Football position breakdowns: Linebackers (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

Throughout the course of the 2010 season, no group of players was more injury-riddled for the Iowa Hawkeyes than their linebacking corps.

Entering last fall, Iowa had a veteran trio starting, even with the losses of both Pat Angerer and A.J. Edds to adjust to. Jeremiha Hunter had started on the outside since his sophomore campaign, Jeff Tarpinian was ready to take over for Angerer as the Hawkeyes' Mike 'backer, and Tyler Nielsen impressed the coaches enough to warrant starting where Edds played.

All three linebackers suffered injuries in 2010. Tarpinian had a stinger that lingered throughout the entire Big Ten portion of Iowa's season. Hunter suffered an injury against Wisconsin that kept him out against Michigan State and he didn't play much in the Hawkeyes' Insight Bowl win over Missouri. Nielsen suffered a neck injury during Iowa's 37-6 win over Michigan State that kept him sidelined the rest of the way.

Instead, Iowa found itself playing linebackers such as Troy Johnson, James Morris and Shane DiBona throughout most of the 2010 season. In fact, once Morris cracked the 2-deep as a true freshman, he remained on the field. The Solon, Iowa native started the final six games of 2010 for the Hawkeyes and finished fourth on the team with 70 tackles.

This spring, two of the three spots seemed to be secured.

Morris enters his sophomore season starting at the Mike position, while Nielsen returns for his senior year in the role he played last year on the outside prior to his neck injury. Before getting hurt, the Humboldt, Iowa native started eight games and finished with 42 tackles as well as recording an interception in Iowa's 35-7 on Sept. 11 over Iowa State.

Also of note is that listed behind Morris on the 2-deep released on March 23 was senior linebacker Bruce Davis, who started the Hawkeyes' season opener against Eastern Illinois last fall and ended up tearing his ACL in a game against Arizona.

The uncertainty, if there is any, is at the other outside spot that was played by Hunter the past three seasons. It was the only position on the spring 2-deep that featured co-starters in sophomores Christian Kirksey and Anthony Hitchens. Listed behind them was DiBona, who is currently out this spring due to offseason surgery. DiBona started games last season against Michigan State and Indiana, and finished his redshirt freshman season with a total of 13 tackles.

Kirksey came into the spring listed at 6-2, 215 pounds, while Hitchens, a converted defensive back, is listed at 6-1, 215 pounds. The two appeared in a combined 21 games for the Hawkeyes last season as true freshmen.

Overall, this is a group that if healthy, has plenty of leadership between Morris and Nielsen. This would have been a better unit last year had it not been ravaged with injuries, and there's no reason to think the play from the linebacking corps won't be better if these two guys especially can stay on the field for Iowa.

In the meantime, the intrigue will be with who emerges as the third 'backer once this team gets closer to the 2011 season.