

2011 Spring Football position breakdowns: Special Teams (premium)

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Iowa's special teams proved to be a concern throughout the course of the 2010 season. Hawkeye losses such as games against Arizona and Wisconsin showed just how critical quality special teams play is and how it can make or break a season.

Once again, it will be an important phase to keep an eye on in 2011.

The first issue at hand is who handles long-snapping duties. Although it is probably the most anonymous position in football, it was one that Andrew Schulze performed well in for the last three years. Replacing Schulze in 2011 is sophomore Casey Kreiter, who hails from DeWitt, Iowa.

The biggest question mark with special teams between now and September is with the punting situation. Ryan Donahue started every game the past four seasons for the Hawkeyes and also handled the holding duties on field goal and PAT attempts during that span.

Should the Ray Guy Award finalist get selected in this month's NFL Draft, Donahue will be the first Hawkeye punter to be drafted since Reggie Roby went in the sixth round of the 1983 NFL Draft to the Miami Dolphins. Simply put, his void is one that can't go unnoticed.

The likely replacement to Donahue this coming season is senior Eric Guthrie, but the 6-6, 245-pound punter will have some competition in the form of redshirt freshman Jonny Mullings,

who originally hails from Australia and is listed at 6-3, 210 pounds. This is a battle worth keeping an eye on because should Guthrie struggle, Mullings might be on the field sooner than expected.

Then there's the kicking situation. Daniel Murray has moved on, but injuries hindered him from being a difference in the battle for field goal, extra point, and kickoff duties between Trent Mossbrucker and Mike Meyer. Although Mossbrucker had the experience playing as a true freshman in 2008 before redshirting in 2009, Meyer ultimately beat both veteran kickers despite being a true freshman walk-on.

Meyer entered his sophomore campaign ahead of Mossbrucker on the spring 2-deep. Last season, the Dubuque native connected on 14-of-17 field goal attempts and handled 69 of the Hawkeyes' 75 kickoffs. In fact, he was the only one of the three kickers who even attempted a field goal. Iowa's first field goal didn't occur until the fourth week of the season in a game against Ball State, the same week Meyer took over all the kicking duties. Meyer was also 31-of-33 on PAT attempts last season, while Mossbrucker was 13-of-14.

Finally, there's the return aspect with special teams. There is a glaring question mark with punt returns, as all 180 punt return yards accumulated last season came from players who were seniors. Senior wide receiver Marvin McNutt was listed as the team's punt returner on the spring 2-deep, but he not has never returned a punt in a game, he also is out this spring following off-season surgery. One name that has come up is junior safety Micah Hyde, but nothing is set in stone here.

As for kickoff returns, one player who will definitely be back returning kicks this season is junior wide receiver Keenan Davis, who compiled 175 of the Hawkeyes' 809 kickoff return yards in 2010.

The fact of the matter is that special teams is and should be

a concern for Kirk Ferentz and his staff between now and when the season begins in September. Between a new long-snapper, a new punter, and a new punt returner, a lot still needs to be determined. Not to mention the question of whether Meyer secures the kicking duties again for 2011 will be abound.

It might not be the area that can make Iowa's season, but as last year demonstrated, it could certainly break Iowa's season if things go array.