

2011 Iowa position breakdowns: Quarterbacks/Running Backs (premium)

*Every day this week, *HawkeyeDrive.com* will be previewing the 2011 version of the Iowa Hawkeyes position-by-position. This is the first of our seven-part series, focusing on the Iowa quarterbacks and running backs.*

By Brendan Stiles

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The Iowa backfield has two certainties entering the 2011 season – junior James Vandenberg will be the starting quarterback, and sophomore Marcus Coker will start at running back.

Beyond that, however, uncertainty arises.

The Hawkeyes know what they have in Vandenberg. He started two games for an injured Ricky Stanzi in 2009 and went 1-1. The one defeat was in overtime to Ohio State in a game that would've secured a Big Ten title for the Hawkeyes had it gone the other way.

But the gunslinger from Keokuk, Iowa, isn't what he was two years ago. Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz has commented multiple times this summer on how Vandenberg could've stepped in and been as productive last year had Stanzi not been there.

In fact, they might almost be too similar.

"Both of us were pretty slow, so you're not going to see any options put in anytime soon," Vandenberg said jokingly. "But

he was a really intelligent guy. He knew all the ins and outs of the offense, and that's just something I'm going to try and continue to grow on."

Having three years in Iowa's system, Vandenberg said he has the playbook down by heart now, something that might have completely been the case two years ago. He doesn't expect any drastic changes being done with him at the helm, but offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Ken O'Keefe said it would ultimately depend on what happens during camp should new wrinkles get put in as a result of the transition at QB.

"You hardly ever see the same stuff year after year after year being effective," O'Keefe said. "Each guy is going to have his own style."

Behind him are three quarterbacks, two of which are vying for that No. 2 job. Fellow junior John Wienke was in a tight battle before with Vandenberg for the back-up job behind Stanzi and now sees himself in the same spot, only with redshirt freshman A.J. Derby in the fold.

The competition doesn't seem to be something that bothers the 6-5 lefty, however.

"We've been around here awhile, and we all know quite a bit," Wienke said. "We've got to do as much as we can to help out the team, help out the younger guys and push everyone forward."

With Derby, an Iowa City native, making the strides he made during the spring, Ferentz said an emphasis will be placed on determining the first back-up sooner than later.

As for the running backs, there isn't an ideal number of carries per game the coaches would like to give Coker. Running backs coach Lester Erb said it would depend on each individual in-game situation. In Iowa's 27-24 win over Missouri in the 2010 Insight Bowl, Coker showed he could be a clear No. 1 back

like Shonn Greene and Fred Russell before him, rushing for 219 yards on 33 carries and scoring twice.

That performance coming four months after a broken collarbone sidelined him during most of fall camp left a lasting impression on Ferentz.

"One of the most impressive things he did last year was the way he was practicing pretty well when he got able to get back on the field from a health standpoint," Ferentz said. "It was clear that he paid attention. That's unusual when a player improves when they're not practicing, but I thought he did that."

Right now, junior Jason White is listed behind Coker on the preseason 2-deep. White has seen time at running back during practices even though he has switched sides of the ball ad nauseum. In fact, he had a bulk of the carries in Iowa's spring practice that was open to the public last April.

Two other names will be worth noting in competition for the No. 2 back. Redshirt freshman De'Andre Johnson found himself a little behind the 8-ball last season, and the coaches are looking for him to develop into a more complete back in 2011. Then there's incoming freshman Mika'il McCall, who will make things interesting over the next few weeks as Iowa figures out its depth in the backfield.

"It's definitely going to be a big competition, not just at the second position, but keeping it fired up under Marcus," Johnson said.

Iowa also has a void to fill at fullback with Brett Morse moving on after starting the last three seasons. It appeared as though sophomore Brad Rogers would be the "next man in," and he still might be. However, a heart condition discovered prior to the Insight Bowl kept him from playing in that game and from practicing with the team during the spring.

At the moment, junior fullback Jonathan Gimm would be the starter if Rogers isn't able to return to the field as soon as he and the coaching staff want him back out there.

"Right now, I got to be able to pass a standard test to get back on the field," Rogers said. "This hiccup kind of set me back a little bit, but once I get back on, I should be right back on track."