

2011 Big Ten football previews: Iowa

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

As the 2011 season inches closer, we have discussed every single Big Ten team, except for one. Our series of season previews concludes today with the Iowa Hawkeyes, who come off an 8-5 2010 season capped by a 27-24 victory over Missouri in the Insight Bowl.

We're just over a week away from the Hawkeyes' season opener against Tennessee Tech, and to be quite honest, it's still difficult to get a grasp of this team as a whole. It's almost like a puzzle where the pieces are all there, and it's simply a matter of putting it together. Some of the pieces here are obvious. Others not so much.

At quarterback, Iowa is set with junior James Vandenberg as the starter, but a No. 2 signal-caller hasn't been established yet between junior John Wienke and redshirt freshman A.J. Derby. If Vandenberg makes it through the entire season healthy, who No. 2 is won't matter. But if something were to happen, this could be an issue.

Sophomore running back Marcus Coker has solidified himself as the featured back. I think it's safe to say that right now, junior Jason White will be the No. 2 back, and true freshman running back Mika'il McCall would be No. 3.

Iowa has two established receivers in senior Marvin McNutt and junior Keenan Davis. However, this is where players need to be developed because the Hawkeyes lost a lot of valuable depth from its receiving corps. I think two tight ends for sure – senior Brad Herman and sophomore C.J. Fiedorowicz – will play

significant minutes in this offense.

Up front, the Hawkeyes return both tackles – junior Riley Reiff and senior Markus Zusevics – and junior center James Ferentz. I definitely believe this is the strength of Iowa's offense, along with the backs and tight ends. Two other seasons you could have said this were 2002 and 2008, so from that standpoint, offensive production could be very encouraging in 2011.

Defensively, the strength might be the secondary, even without the services of Tyler Sash and Brett Greenwood. Senior cornerback Shaun Prater returns following a season where he was first-team all-Big Ten, and even though he switched over from cornerback to free safety, junior Micah Hyde could be an even bigger impact than he was a year ago.

The concerns I see are with the front seven. Obviously, the defensive line lost three players that were all drafted by NFL teams last spring. The Hawkeyes do bring back a pair of seniors in defensive end Broderick Binns and defensive tackle Mike Daniels. They're going to be counting on the leadership from that duo of D-linemen since they haven't made it a secret how they plan to rotate anywhere between 6-8 defensive linemen per game.

Then there's the linebacking corps, where senior Tyler Nielsen and sophomore James Morris return. Injuries decimated the linebackers last season, and Iowa has already lost sophomore linebacker Shane DiBona for the season with an Achilles' injury. If this group can stay relatively healthy, the defense should play better this season.

I also see issues with special teams that need to be resolved. Right now, the Hawkeyes can't afford for senior punter Eric Guthrie to struggle or get hurt because the current No. 2 punter is Wienke. Iowa also has a new long snapper in sophomore Casey Kreiter, a new punt returner, and at least one

new kickoff returner. It's also worth noting that special teams played a factor in three of the Hawkeyes' losses last season, so this is an area Iowa needs to improve if it's going to have any sort of success this fall.

I've seen all the prognostications, and I'll just simply get this part out of the way now: I agree with most of what has been said, particularly where Iowa could finish anywhere as high as 9-3 and as low as 7-5. I think the Hawkeyes can certainly compete for a Legends Division title, and it wouldn't be a major surprise if they did win it. But with that being said, the Legends is clearly the more difficult division.

Maybe it's overanalyzing on my part, but I feel Iowa's schedule is more difficult than it initially appears.

Normally, I'd look at this year's non-conference slate and say Iowa should come out 4-0. The only issue with that is Iowa has only gone unbeaten in non-conference regular season games three times under head coach Kirk Ferentz – 2003, 2006, and 2009. Combined that with the fact this year's team is relatively young, and a slip-up is likely to happen. The question is simply where.

The two games I feel Iowa wins without a doubt in my mind or anyone else's is the opener against Tennessee Tech and the game against UL-Monroe on Sept. 24. The Hawkeyes' early misstep could be Iowa State, except for the fact that Iowa has performed pretty well against the Cyclones since Paul Rhoads took over in Ames. Then there's the Sept. 17 game against Pittsburgh, which is at Kinnick Stadium. I don't believe the Panthers win the Big East this season, but they're certainly a legit contender in that conference.

My point is this: If Iowa does manage to start this season 4-0, that would be a very encouraging sign entering Big Ten play, and it's something fans probably shouldn't take for

granted.

Following a bye week, the Hawkeyes open Big Ten play walking into the hornets' nest known as Beaver Stadium to play Penn State, who could be playing for its season that afternoon. Then Iowa gets the luxury of playing four of five games at Kinnick Stadium, but those first two will be critical as Northwestern has won five of six against the Hawkeyes, and Indiana has nearly pulled off upsets of Iowa in consecutive seasons. After a second straight trip to Minnesota, the month of November provides three major division challenges with Michigan and No. 17 Michigan State coming to Kinnick Stadium and a trip to No. 10 Nebraska on the Day after Thanksgiving. In the middle of that is a trip to Purdue, a place the Hawkeyes have won once (in 2005) over the past 20 years.

Again, I would expect this team to reach a 10th bowl in 11 years, but given how wide open the Big Ten could be this season, some of the bowl games that normally wouldn't have been in the equation before might be in 2011.

It will be interesting to see how everything ultimately plays out here in 2011 with this team, mainly because of the uncertainty that exists at this moment.

Click here to read our season previews of the other Big Ten teams, each of which include audio from players (please note you must have either a paid monthly or yearly subscription, or a three-day free trial, to *HawkeyeDrive.com* to access all of these): [Ohio State](#), [Illinois](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Indiana](#), [Purdue](#), [Penn State](#), [Minnesota](#), [Northwestern](#), [Michigan](#), [Michigan State](#), [Nebraska](#).