

2012 Spring Football position breakdowns: Tight Ends (premium)

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The 2011 season marked the first time in years where Iowa lacked in overall productivity from the tight end position. However, the emergence of C.J. Fiedorowicz from November on provides enough optimism for Hawkeye fans to think that 2012 will be more of what had become the norm under head coach Kirk Ferentz.

Fiedorowicz's maturation process really became evident during Iowa's 24-16 win over Michigan back on Nov. 5. He entered that contest with just three catches for 53 yards and had just moved past both tight ends Brad Herman and Zach Derby on the 2-deep. In that game, he only had one catch for nine yards, but that one reception set up a second-quarter touchdown that moved the Hawkeyes ahead 14-6 before ultimately winning.

From that game forward, Fiedorowicz became a primary target on third down for quarterback James Vandenberg. He finished the 2011 season with 16 catches for 167 yards receiving and scored three touchdowns, one of which came in Iowa's 31-14 loss to Oklahoma in the Insight Bowl.

Now with Fiedorowicz entering his junior season, he's in a position where as long as he continues to develop like he started to late last season, he'll be a key weapon in the Hawkeye offense this fall. How much the tight end is used under new offensive coordinator Greg Davis will remain to be seen, but seeing how Fiedorowicz is 6-7 and would create mismatches for any defensive back trying to cover him, one has

to think Vandenberg will continue to go to him whenever he's open, especially given some of the inexperience behind Keenan Davis and Kevonte Martin-Manley at the receiver position.

Fiedorowicz isn't the only tight end that will be worth keeping an eye on in 2012, however. One name to watch this spring and as the Hawkeyes go through fall camp later this year is sophomore tight end Ray Hamilton. He only had one 15-yard reception last season, which came in Iowa's 34-7 win over Tennessee Tech, but Hamilton is listed at 6-5, 248 pounds this spring. In instances where Iowa does go to two tight end sets, which had been quite a bit under former offensive coordinator Ken O'Keefe, Hamilton will likely be the one lined up opposite Fiedorowicz.

Iowa will also have senior tight end Zach Derby, who had the opportunity to showcase himself in key situations last season. Derby finished with 12 catches for 117 yards, but wasn't as involved late in the season as Fiedorowicz went on his late-season flurry. He probably won't have as big a role as either of the other two tight ends, but Derby does provide both depth and experience at the position should the Hawkeyes need him for whatever reason in 2012.

One last thing worth noting in this discussion is the latest coaching change to happen just this week, with graduate assistant David Raih taking over coaching duties with tight ends so former tight ends coach Eric Johnson can concentrate more on his duties as Iowa's recruiting coordinator. Raih is a former Iowa quarterback and an up-and-comer in the coaching ranks, so it will be interesting to see how the tight ends adapt to his style.

The question is simply how much more involved will tight ends be for Iowa in 2012. If the amount of involvement is what many suspect, then not only will there be improvement from this position, but it will also take loads of pressure off other positions in the offense trying to learn the new scheme.