

# 2012 Spring Football position breakdowns: Offensive Line (premium)

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The offensive line has always been a staple of Iowa football under Kirk Ferentz. This spring, it's an area being placed under an enormous microscope.

For one thing, former center Brian Ferentz has returned to the program to take over as the offensive line coach after Reese Morgan was moved over to coach the D-line. Regardless of how one feels about Kirk hiring his oldest son as an assistant, Brian has the pedigree now after being the tight ends coach for the New England Patriots this past NFL season, one that saw New England come within two minutes of winning Super Bowl XLVI before ultimately losing to the New York Giants.

But it's not just the NFL background that might be of benefit with Brian. Don't underestimate the fact that he spent five years in the program as a player who was always remembered for both his physical and mental toughness. Bringing on an assistant in his late 20s/early 30s with the passion Brian has for Iowa is something that could really pay off for the Hawkeyes long-term.

As for the actual group of players he'll be coaching, there are a handful of questions that need to be addressed. Right now, the only certainty is senior center James Ferentz is in line to start for the third straight season.

The biggest of these questions is at left tackle after Riley Reiff declared for the NFL Draft. Seeing how Reiff has been

widely projected as a first-round pick, this is something Kirk Ferentz probably envisioned unfolding after last season.

The most likely player to replace Reiff at left tackle is sophomore Brandon Scherff, who was primarily used at left guard last season, rotating with Matt Tobin. Assuming Scherff, who entered the spring listed at 6-5, 310 pounds handles the left tackle duties, that would enable Iowa to keep the senior Tobin at left guard.

Meanwhile, the right side of the line is where players will really need to emerge for the Hawkeyes as both guard Adam Gettis and tackle Markus Zusevics have moved on and are looking at potential NFL careers.

Junior Brett Van Sloten looks to be the odds-on favorite at right tackle after having been listed behind Zusevics at that spot for each of the past two seasons. Van Sloten entered this spring at 6-7, 292 pounds. One name to keep an eye on though is junior Nolan MacMillan, who is currently second behind Van Sloten and has been practicing this spring. MacMillan missed all of last season due to a sports hernia injury. He had experience starting at guard in 2010.

Right guard, one name that could emerge is Austin Blythe, maybe not right away but down the road. Blythe redshirted last season and comes in at 6-3, 275 pounds. The player he's competing with at that spot is junior Conor Bofelli, who was listed behind James Ferentz at center for the bulk of 2011. Bofelli is listed at 6-5, 290 pounds.

The spring gives Brian Ferentz a good opportunity to see what combinations seem best suited once fall camp comes around in August. He made clear when he spoke last month that depth, versatility and competition will matter, especially with three linemen from last year's squad moving on.

Watching how the offensive line develops here between now and the first weekend of the 2012 season will say a lot as to how

much better (or worse) the Hawkeyes end up being both as an offense and as a team.