

2012 Spring Football position breakdowns: Linebackers (premium)

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In 2011, there was no group on the Iowa Hawkeyes decimated more by injuries than the linebacking corps. From fall camp on, injuries took a toll and hampered the team's depth at the position.

Now in 2012, the linebackers look to be a much healthier group. Assuming the injury bug doesn't hit them hard this upcoming season, this group has three juniors Iowa knows it can count on.

The anchors of this unit are James Morris and Christian Kirksey, who both recorded 110 tackles each to lead the Hawkeyes last season. Morris started the first five games at the MIKE position before an ankle injury prevented him from playing in Iowa's 41-31 win over Northwestern. He would remain at the MIKE against Indiana the following week, but then moved over to the WILL spot for the last six games, including the Insight Bowl.

As for Kirksey, he was the lone linebacker to start all 13 games in 2011, playing the first seven games at the WILL before moving over to the LE0 position once Morris returned from his injury and moved outside. While the spring 2-deep has Morris back at MIKE, Kirksey remains listed at LE0.

Filling the WILL position this spring is junior Anthony Hitchens, who appeared in eight games last season. Hitchens had 25 tackles and a fumble recovery while also dealing with a

leg injury that prevented him from playing in the first five games of Big Ten play.

While the linebacking corps loses the leadership of two-year starter Tyler Nielsen, coming back to provide depth this spring is junior Shane DiBona, who missed the entire 2011 season after rupturing his Achilles' tendon during fall camp last August. Also on the recovery back from injury is junior Dakota Getz, who suffered a season-ending knee injury during the opening kickoff of Iowa's 44-41 loss to Iowa State on Sept. 10. DiBona is listed on the 2-deep behind Kirksey at LE0, while Getz wasn't listed.

Another guy who provides depth at the MIKE is sophomore Quniton Alston. While he didn't start any games as a true freshman, Alston did appear in six games while Morris and Nielsen both dealt with injuries. He collected seven tackles in those six games played. Two other names to keep an eye on this spring are sophomore Marcus Collins and redshirt freshman Cole Fisher.

Like many of the positions on this team, linebackers were also impacted by the coaching shuffle that took place this offseason. On board as the new linebackers coach is former Iowa linebacker and NFL special-teams standout LeVar Woods. Prior to being named to his new position last February, Woods had served as Iowa's administrative assistant and was the interim defensive line coach for the Insight Bowl after Rick Kaczinski left to join Nebraska's coaching staff.

Much like the addition of former center Brian Ferentz to the coaching staff, having a former player like Woods who has a strong passion for the game and teaching younger players is something that could lead to big dividends for the Hawkeyes down the road. Players along the defensive line last year thought he left an impression on them in their final week of bowl prep before playing Oklahoma.

What also helps make the transition here smooth is that Woods was a fill-in during the 2010 season when former defensive coordinator Norm Parker was hospitalized following a foot amputation. He knows the program and can relate to the players.

As long as this group can stay healthy in 2012, a nucleus composed of Morris, Kirksey and Hitchens should be strong enough to provide leadership to a defense that desperately needs it right now.