

2012 Spring Football position breakdowns: Special Teams (premium)

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The play of Iowa's special teams in 2011 was a mixed bag. Some bits of it proved to be good. Other bits proved to be sloppy.

As the Hawkeyes continue their way through spring practices and prepare for the 2012 season, football's third phase is one that will continue to receive significant attention, even with coaching continuity remaining in place.

Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz said the unit would be aided some by linebackers coach LeVar Woods, who is expected to work with the punt return team and help defensive backs coach Darrell Wilson with field goal blocking. However, Wilson and running backs coach Lester Erb remain in charge of special teams. Wilson will continue to work with the kickoff team, while Erb stays focused on working with all the other aspects.

One change that isn't expected in terms of player personnel is on punt returns. Senior cornerback Micah Hyde, who only compiled 106 yards on 13 returns last season, remains the team's top punt returner. As for kickoff returns, the one player Iowa lost from last season is Jordan Bernstine. However, Bernstine had 30 of the Hawkeyes' 46 kickoff returns and compiled 713 return yards.

Senior wide receiver Keenan Davis is the most experienced kickoff return man Iowa currently has, but with him being the Hawkeyes' No. 1 receiver now, the chances of him being used on special teams dwindle. The most likely candidates to assume

these duties are sophomore wideout Kevonte Martin-Manley and sophomore running back Damon Bullock. All four of Martin-Manley's returns in 2011 came in Iowa's 20-7 loss to Nebraska, while Bullock had two returns, one of which came in the Insight Bowl against Oklahoma.

Another player that would've been a likely kickoff returner in 2012 was sophomore running back Jordan Canzeri, but that's no longer an option for the Hawkeyes with Canzeri tearing his ACL back on March 28.

While the return game appears more set, the kicking game remains a question mark. Junior kicker Mike Meyer entered the spring as the No. 1 kicker, but Ferentz acknowledged the competition between him, senior Trent Mossbrucker and redshirt freshman Marshall Koehn remained wide open.

Meyer handled all field goal and extra-point duties in 2011, as well as 66 of Iowa's 68 kickoffs. On PATs, he was a perfect 44-of-44. But Meyer was only 14-of-20 on field goal attempts, with the majority of those six misses coming in the latter half of the season. As for his 66 kickoffs, only four of them were downed for touchbacks, while three went out of bounds. That's not really a ratio any kicker should have, thus the reason for the position remaining open.

Mossbrucker has experience to his name, but Koehn is the player to watch here, especially when it comes to kickoff duties. Ferentz has said on multiple occasions how he's impressed by Koehn's power, which is what's keeping him in consideration right now.

Finally, there's the punt team, which loses punter Eric Guthrie from last season. Senior quarterback John Wienke, who ended up becoming Iowa's No. 2 punter behind Guthrie last year, is currently slated as the starting punter, as well as the team's holder on PAT and field goal attempts. At the moment, Wienke is competing at punter with sophomore Jonny

Mullings.

But with that being said, this position will be more worth watching in the fall when incoming freshman Connor Kornbrath arrives on campus. If Kornbrath is as good as advertised, he might see the field right away, making this current battle between Wienke and Mullings moot.

The last thing worth noting here is that junior Casey Kreiter returns as the team's long snapper, a duty he began handling on a regular basis last season.

Special teams will be under more of a magnifying glass come August when everyone's on campus and the season draws closer. But that doesn't take away from some of the intrigue that currently exists either.