

2012 Iowa position breakdowns: Offensive Line

This week, HawkeyeDrive.com presents an eight-part series of position breakdowns as the Iowa Hawkeyes continue preparing for the 2012 season. After previously focusing on [quarterbacks](#), [running backs](#) and the group of [wide receivers and tight ends](#), our fourth part examines the team's offensive line.

By Brendan Stiles

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For a unit that saw three of its starters from last season find themselves in NFL training camps, there's reason for Iowa fans to be optimistic about the Hawkeyes' current offensive line. With former Iowa center Brian Ferentz now taking over the reins as the Hawkeyes' offensive line coach, the potential is there.

Ferentz originally said during the early portion of fall camp that 8-9 players were in contention for starting spots and that he's ideally like to have at least seven players able to compete for spots over the course of the fall.

But barring anything unusual between now and Iowa's opener on Sept. 1 against Northern Illinois, the Hawkeyes' quintet of starting offensive linemen will be one that features five native Iowans – sophomore left tackle Brandon Scherff (Denison), senior left guard Matt Tobin (Worthington), senior center James Ferentz (Iowa City), redshirt freshman right guard Austin Blythe (Williamsburg) and junior right tackle Brett Van Sloten (Decorah). All five were listed on the 2-deep with the first-team offense and all five have worked with the first-team offense throughout camp.

"To have a chance to have five guys from Iowa obviously is special," Brian said. "But what we're really trying to do is put the five guys out there that can help our football team win football games."

The most experienced of the bunch is Brian's younger brother, James, who anchors the O-line after having started every game at center for each of the past two seasons.

While being in the unique position of having his older brother as the position coach, the 6-2, 284-pound center said one area of his game he believes has gotten better because of Brian has been consistency.

"We'll throw in a game tape and I've never really noticed there are a lot of inconsistencies with footwork that go from play to play," James said. "You think it's a good play, but he has really been able to just point out an improvement you could make on something you would've thought is good."

"To have him around with that kind of honesty and being able to point out those things has really been beneficial to me."

Both Tobin and Scherff split time last season starting at left guard. But with Riley Reiff leaving early to become a first-round pick of the Detroit Lions, both will likely be starters in 2012 with Scherff moving over to fill that vacancy at left tackle and the 6-6, 290-pound Tobin remaining at left guard.

"I know the offense a little better, a lot of the little things on the offensive line like playing guard, 'checking with me,' a bunch of stuff that I knew, but couldn't do on a consistent basis," Tobin said. "I kind of just have the confidence to play a little bit better."

For Scherff, the transition to left tackle has been seamless. While he was never listed behind Reiff at left tackle on the 2-deep, he had limited playing experience at the position in both games and practices last season. Now as the guy

protecting senior quarterback James Vandenberg's blind side, the 6-5, 310-pound tackle looks to follow in a legacy that features the likes of Reiff, Bryan Bulaga and Robert Gallery – all of whom were first round picks.

"He's a big, strong, mature guy with a great attitude, good work ethic," head coach Kirk Ferentz said. "I think we all feel he's probably a little bit more comfortable on the outside."

Meanwhile, the inexperience lies on the right side of the line. Van Sloten will finally get a crack at right tackle after spending two seasons behind Markus Zusevics on Iowa's 2-deep. However, Van Sloten did find himself playing the second half of the Hawkeyes' Insight Bowl loss to Oklahoma last season in Zusevics' place.

"He shows guys how to do things simply with his actions," Brian said about the 6-7, 292-pound Van Sloten. "He's a guy who maximizes the most of what he has. He's very fundamentally sound. He works at it and I think it's important to him. I really do."

As for right guard, Blythe has emerged as the one getting the majority of reps with the first offense. The battle has continued on between the 6-3, 275-pound Blythe and 6-4, 270-pound redshirt freshman Jordan Walsh.

"I think we have a pretty good, healthy competition there," Kirk said. "That's a spot that's going to be fun to watch."

One other player who could be in the running for early playing time this season is sophomore offensive tackle Andrew Donnal. At 6-7, 302 pounds, Donnal was the guy listed on the 2-deep behind Reiff at left tackle last season and could possibly be a contributor up front if his name gets called.

Should Iowa have offensive success in 2012, what's in place along the offensive line will likely be a big reason why.

“If you can help us, and we feel like you can help us win games, you’re going to see time on Saturdays,” Brian said. “Because there’s no other way to get experience than to play when it counts.”