

# 2012 Iowa position breakdowns: Defensive 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](#), [wide receivers and tight ends](#), and the [offensive line](#), our fifth part examines the team's defensive line.\**

By Brendan Stiles

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Entering the 2012 season, Iowa's two biggest question marks are at running back and along the defensive line.

The reasoning for the D-line – at least at this moment – is valid. No Hawkeye unit has gone through more transition in the past year. It began in late December, one week before Iowa played Oklahoma in the 2011 Insight Bowl. After five seasons as the defensive line coach, Rick Kaczinski left to take the same job on Bo Pelini's staff at Nebraska. As a result, LeVar Woods – now the Hawkeyes' linebackers coach – filled Kaczinski's position in an interim role for that bowl game.

When Iowa was ready to name a permanent D-line coach, head coach Kirk Ferentz stayed in-house by asking Reese Morgan to switch over after coaching the offensive line for nine seasons.

"He's definitely a teacher," redshirt freshman defensive tackle Darian Cooper said. "He definitely works with you. He's very technically sound. He's the type of guy that in the film room, he's going to make sure that you understand the defense whole-heartedly before you step on the field."

The Hawkeyes find themselves looking to fill at least two major voids up front left by Broderick Binns and Mike Daniels, who was a fourth-round choice of the Green Bay Packers in the 2012 NFL Draft. Last year's group also featured two other seniors in Thomas Nardo and Lebron Daniel, both of whom started alongside Binns and Daniels in the Insight Bowl.

If there is good news with this group, it's that depth is slowly becoming a strength with a couple of players making their returns to the gridiron prior to fall camp starting last week. Junior defensive end Dominic Alvis returns from a season-ending knee injury that occurred in Iowa's 24-16 win over Michigan back on Nov. 5, while sophomore defensive tackle Carl Davis (6-5, 310 pounds) missed all of spring practice following knee surgery after last season.

Prior to his injury, Alvis was making a name for himself with 30 tackles and 1.5 sacks, both of which were team-highs among defensive linemen who are back this season.

"I'm rusty, but every day is just dedicated to getting better than I was yesterday," Alvis said during the team's Media Day on Aug. 6. "That's my attitude going forward."

The player whose progress Ferentz has been most pleased by this offseason has been that of sophomore Louis Trinca-Pasat, a Chicago native who is currently listed as one of the Hawkeyes' first-string defensive tackles. Trinca-Pasat is listed at 6-3, 270 pounds. Ferentz said during Big Ten Media Days last month how Trinca-Pasat went from uncertain about whether he wanted to continue playing football altogether to someone who made significant strides during the spring and summer.

"He went from being that guy, to a guy who was just out there, basically a body from the bowl preparation, to being a guy that's maybe one of the most important players on the team in March and April," Ferentz said. "He hasn't played a game yet,

but I really have reason to think he's going to play well in the years forward."

At the other end position opposite Alvis is an ongoing battle between a pair of seniors – Steve Bigach and Joe Gaglione. Both players have had reps with the first-string defense in practice during fall camp. Bigach has slightly more playing experience, making starts in five games last season at both end and tackle.

Then there's a group of underclassmen that could find themselves wreaking havoc for the Iowa defense this fall. Among the names from this group to watch is Cooper, who is vying for a spot as one of the tackles and a player Morgan said would eventually see the field in 2012. Others include redshirt freshmen Riley McMin, Dean Tsopanides and Melvin Spears, all of whom have been working as defensive ends during both spring practice and currently in fall camp.

Among true freshmen, two names to be aware of are a pair of defensive tackles, Faith Ekakitie and Jaleel Johnson. Ekakitie comes in listed at 6-3, 275 pounds, while Johnson is currently listed at 6-4, 300 pounds.

If this group can find leadership akin to what Iowa has had in recent years past along its front four, the defensive line might be a group that exceeds the expectations of many on the outside. The question isn't about depth, but whether the four guys who are out there against Northern Illinois and beyond can hold their own over the course of a 12-game season.

"It's no secret that we have, I guess you can say a target on our back," Bigach said. "When you're an athlete and you get put in that situation, you got to love it."

"If we continue to improve, hopefully we can put a good unit out there."