

# 2012 Iowa position breakdowns: Linebackers

*\*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](#), the [offensive line](#) and [defensive line](#) our sixth part examines the team's corps of linebackers.\**

By Brendan Stiles

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Two years ago, Christian Kirksey, James Morris and Anthony Hitchens went through their first fall camps as true freshmen. At this point in time, Hitchens was listed as a running back, only to later move over to safety and then eventually move again to linebacker last season. Meanwhile, Kirksey and Morris both knew they'd be linebackers but were behind the likes of Tyler Nielsen and Jeff Tarpinian on the depth chart.

Now, this trio of juniors makes up the anchor of the Hawkeye linebacking corps, and perhaps the entire Iowa defense for that matter.

"I remember walking first practice our freshman year, I looked at James like, 'Yo, we're in college now. This is like the big leagues, you know,'" Kirksey said. "I remember we used to get yelled at in practice. We just took it all in.

"On the field, we have a good bond. Off the field, we have an even bigger bond."

Morris has started for the better part of two seasons, while Kirksey was the lone Iowa linebacker to start every game in 2011 – the first seven at WILL and the last six at LE0. Morris

switched over to WILL after returning from an ankle injury that caused him to miss the Hawkeyes' 45-24 win over Indiana. Both linebackers finished with 110 tackles last season.

Now in more a leadership role, Morris said it's a matter of moving on to what he called "the next phase" – being able to play well cohesively.

"Just with having a better understanding of the defense as a whole and how I fit into it," Morris said about where he believes he has improved over the course of the past two seasons. "Also, how other positions, how we work together to play good defense. I think when you understand that, you're able to play faster."

As Iowa enters the 2012 season, Morris is moving back to the MIKE position he had been accustomed to playing before hurting his ankle while Kirksey remains at LE0 and Hitchens takes over duties at the WILL spot. Hitchens appeared in eight games for the Hawkeyes last season, compiling 25 tackles.

The linebacking corps has also found itself getting acclimated to its new position coach, former Iowa linebacker LeVar Woods. After serving an Administrative Assistant role in the program for the majority of the past four seasons, Woods was named the interim defensive line coach prior to last year's Insight Bowl after Rick Kaczinski left to become an assistant at Nebraska. Now he finds himself in a permanent role at his alma mater coaching the very position he played.

One facet Woods has emphasized heavily since taking over is teaching the linebackers to be visual learners through the film they watch together, using a telestrator he refers to as 'The Rocketship.'

"Like John Madden, I can draw lines and circles and do all these crazy things with it," Woods said. "But I think kids are visual. I know myself, as a learner, I'm a visual learner. I like to see things. I like to see it develop and watch it so

then I can pick it up quicker.

"As much as I can use PowerPoint or video or use 'The Rocketship,' I think that helps kids out."

Last season, this was as injury-plagued a group of players as there was on the entire team. It wasn't quite like 2010, where the Hawkeyes wound up using eight different starting combinations throughout that season, but depth was depleted to the point where Tom Donatell moved up from the secondary in order to start two games at the LEO position while both Morris and Nielsen dealt with injuries.

With younger players like sophomores Quinton Alston and Marcus Collins and redshirt freshmen Cole Fisher and Travis Perry progressing, the Hawkeyes are optimistic about the depth they hope to have at linebacker in the event injuries remain an ongoing issue.

"I feel good about our depth right now," Morris said. "I think the guys down on the depth chart are eager and talented. They want to do well. They get better every day.

"We just need to keep working and keep grinding, keep trying to fix our mistakes and hopefully play mistake-free football."

Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz also reiterated that like last season, he won't be afraid to shuffle linebackers at various spots if he deems it necessary to do so.

"We have some guys with good position flexibility and ultimately we'll try to get our best three out there and have Plan A and Plan B in case you have to make a move after that," Ferentz said.