

2012 Iowa position breakdowns: Secondary

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](#), [defensive line](#) and [linebackers](#), our seventh part examines the team's secondary.

By Brendan Stiles

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Experience, energy, enthusiasm.

All three of these words begin with the letter 'e.' All three of these words could also be used to describe the Iowa secondary as the Hawkeyes prepare for their 2012 season opener against Northern Illinois.

Let's start with experience. Yes, this is a unit that saw Shaun Prater and Jordan Bernstine both get drafted by NFL teams last spring. But returning this fall are two players that have become dependable on this Hawkeye defense.

First there's the most experienced member of this secondary, senior cornerback Micah Hyde. Unlike last year where he spent the entire offseason working at free safety only to play it twice before moving back to corner, Hyde has spent all of this year at his natural position and is considered one of the top cornerbacks in the entire conference.

Then there's the player who was the biggest beneficiary of Hyde's move back to corner, junior free safety Tanner Miller. Once he cracked the starting lineup, Miller remained on the field in 2011. He and Hyde tied for a team-high three

interceptions, but Miller had the most memorable pick of the bunch – a 98-yard interception return for a touchdown in Iowa's 41-31 win over Northwestern back on Oct. 15.

"It's really priceless," defensive backs coach Darrell Wilson said of both players' veteran leadership. "Tanner's kind of the quiet leader. He just leads by example and makes sure everyone is doing the right thing. Micah is a little more vocal. Not overly vocal, but just enough. He's only going to say something when it's meant to be said."

While Hyde and Miller are sure bets to start, the secondary also features experience in its depth with players such as seniors Greg Castillo and Tom Donatell. Castillo started Iowa's first two games last season at corner before being benched following Hyde's move back to the position. Donatell returns to the secondary this season after temporarily switching over to linebacker and make two starts there against Northwestern and Indiana due to injuries.

Interestingly, both Castillo and Donatell have fathers who are NFL assistants – Greg's father Juan is the Philadelphia Eagles' defensive coordinator, while Tom's father Ed is the San Francisco 49ers' defensive backs coach.

"Those are two of the smartest kids on the team, to be honest," Hyde said. "They know every position on the defense. Even though they only play strong safety and corner, they know what they're supposed to do and that's not a big surprise."

As for the other two positions in the defensive backfield, one appears to be set while the other has a stiff competition ongoing. The position that appears set is at the corner opposite Hyde, as junior B.J. Lowery is projected to be the starter. Lowery missed the Hawkeyes' Kid's Day practice on Aug. 11 with an ankle sprain, but returned in time for the team's second open practice Aug. 18 and worked with the first unit.

At strong safety, it appeared sophomore Nico Law would get the first crack at starting. However, Donatell has gotten the bulk of the reps with the first team defense during fall camp. The two have switched off between first and second units, but Parker hasn't tipped his hand either way on which one will start in the season opener.

With younger players like Lowery, Law and redshirt freshman cornerback Torrey Campbell vying for playing time at nickel, that's where the "energy" could be provided.

"Even from the spring, you can tell that they've been in the film room, they've been working on their footwork and things like that," Miller said. "All of us have been working in the offseason and we're getting better day in and day out."

Overall, there seems to be an "enthusiasm" with this group, as it's being regarded as the team's biggest strength defensively. Part of the enthusiasm also comes from knowing that with what's in place along the secondary, blitzing could be more frequent this fall.

"The way we can run, I think we're very athletic back there," Parker said of his secondary. "So it's probably going to give us opportunities to put guys on islands a little bit more if that's what we choose to do."

Those three e's – experience, energy and enthusiasm – make up why this group of defensive backs is one that could be fun for Iowa fans to watch in 2012.