

2012 Iowa position breakdowns: Special Teams

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](#), [linebackers](#) and the [secondary](#), our eighth and final part examines the team's special teams.

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More times than not, special teams play tends to be what differentiates teams that win seven games per season from those that win 10 games and have a shot at playing in a BCS bowl game.

When Iowa went through its memorable 2009 season that concluded with a trip to the Orange Bowl, there were signature moments such as blocking a pair of field goals in seven seconds against UNI and Adrian Clayborn's blocked punt against Penn State that he returned for a go-ahead touchdown. In 2010, Iowa played horrendously on special teams in a loss to Arizona and then the season's signature moment came when Wisconsin executed a fake punt that wound up leading to the game-winning touchdown in a one-point Hawkeye loss.

Last year, Iowa found itself caught off guard when Minnesota executed an onside kick attempt for the second straight season against the Hawkeyes and eventually overcame a 11-point fourth-quarter deficit to beat Iowa, 22-21. The Hawkeyes also had a fumble come on a kickoff return in the second quarter of last year's loss to Michigan State that was ensued by the Spartans scoring two touchdowns and taking a 31-7 halftime

lead.

Looking ahead to 2012, one of the more interesting dynamics in play this season will be with kickoffs. All kickoffs now take place from the 35-yard line instead of the 30, and touchbacks now result in the return team getting the ball on its own 25-yard line instead of its own 20. Teams will still start on their own 20 however if a touchback occurs on a non-kickoff (i.e. punt, fumble out of the end zone, etc.).

"Our outlook on it is just to kick the ball as well as we can, both height and distance," junior kicker Mike Meyer said. "I think it'll probably bring more confidence up."

Meyer will likely handle all kicking duties again in 2012, including kickoffs, and confidence is something that could grow for him there this fall. As a sophomore, Meyer compiled 66 kickoffs, but only four of those were downed for touchbacks.

The Dubuque native made all 44 of his extra-point attempts in 2011, but was only 14-of-20 on field goals, including missing four of his last six attempts. Meyer said he has placed an emphasis this offseason on becoming more consistent from a variety of ranges. Of his 14 made field goals, only eight of them were from 30 yards or further.

"He's going into his third year now as a performer and we really expect him to be playing at a higher level," Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz said.

The biggest special teams question mark Iowa has entering this season is who handles punting duties. Senior John Wienke slowly made the transition from quarterback to punter last season and will handle holding duties on field goals and PATs regardless of who wins the punter competition.

But if Iowa's open practice on Aug. 18 is of any indication, true freshman Connor Kornbrath will likely be the team's

punter the first time it lines up to punt in the season opener against Northern Illinois. During the scrimmage portion of that practice, Kornbrath handled all the punting duties.

Senior cornerback Micah Hyde is the favorite to continue lining up as Iowa's punt returner, a role he handled all of last season. Other names to watch for should anything happen to Hyde would include receivers Keenan Davis and Kevonte Martin-Manley, as well as junior cornerback B.J. Lowery. All four have practiced returning punts during open practices.

As for kickoff returns, Davis and Martin-Manley are among those with experience. Iowa needs to replace at least one return man with Jordan Bernstine – who returned 30 kickoffs last season – now playing in the NFL for the Washington Redskins. This is one area head coach Kirk Ferentz said during Iowa's Media Day could feature some true freshmen. If that ends up being the case, one name to watch could be wide receiver Maurice Fleming.

“Basically anybody that wants to do it and shows that they can do it is going to get an opportunity,” Ferentz said.

Prior history indicates that special teams will at some point this season dictate whether Iowa can realistically compete for a Big Ten crown or find itself finishing 7-5 again or perhaps worse. If the Hawkeyes are going to make any noise in 2012, it's an area that needs improvement.