

2013 Spring Football position breakdowns: Offensive Line (premium)

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If there's one group Iowa fans ought to feel encouraged about as the Hawkeyes continue navigating through spring football, it's the offensive line.

Yes, this is a unit that lost a pair of significant starters from 2012 in Matt Tobin and James Ferentz. Tobin emerged as a dependable player up front for Iowa and ended up starting games at both left guard and left tackle last season. Ferentz, meanwhile, started every game at center for each of the past three years.

However, one look at this group right now is enough to suggest it could be a real productive unit for the Iowa offense and in turn be an integral part of the Hawkeyes trying to bounce back from a 4-8 season in 2013. When Iowa's season last year began to spiral downward, it coincided with injuries to linemen such as Brandon Scherff and Andrew Donnal.

Both players have returned from injuries this spring. Scherff is back at left tackle (the position Tobin occupied once Scherff was hurt) and assuming he's 100 percent healthy when the season starts, he has a chance to be as good an offensive tackle as there is in the entire Big Ten.

Iowa also appears to be set at its other tackle spot in senior Brett Van Sloten, who started every game at right tackle for the Hawkeyes in 2012. The other position that seems to be on lockdown now is center, where even though Ferentz is gone,

sophomore Austin Blythe makes the move over to center after playing games as a guard last season.

Any question marks surrounding the offensive line at this point are placed squarely on the two guard spots, as that seems to be where the heaviest competition is taking place. One player who started to make an emergence late last season and (at least to this point) has begun carrying success over into the spring is senior Conor Boffeli.

For at least two years, Boffeli was listed on Iowa's 2-deep behind Ferentz at center. As injuries continue to deflate the Hawkeyes' depth along the O-line last year, Boffeli was given the opportunity late in the year to start games at left guard. As of this past Sunday, Boffeli was getting reps with the first-string offense at that same left guard spot during practice.

On the right side, there seems to be a battle brewing between Donnal (now that he's back from his season-ending injury suffered against Penn State last October) and sophomore Jordan Walsh, who got the opportunity to play some late last season after Donnal's injury. Walsh worked with the first-string offense during Iowa's most recent practice, but Donnal has more playing experience given how he was starting up front prior to his injury.

One last name worth mentioning is Nolan MacMillan. While the senior isn't practicing this spring due to recovery from injuries, he's someone that has been around and when healthy could be a key part of the Hawkeyes' offensive line.

This is a group that's worth feeling good about right now, but the results still have to be there for it as well as the entire offense as a whole if Iowa's going to rebound in 2013.