

2013 Spring Football position breakdowns: Special Teams (premium)

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The biggest observation that can be made about Iowa's special teams this spring is the rejuvenation that has come from first-year assistant Chris White taking over and placing a major emphasis on football's third phase.

It wasn't that the Hawkeyes struggled on special teams in 2012 (aside from a horrendous blunder attempting to recover an onside kick against Central Michigan). Mike Meyer had as productive a season as any kicker in the Big Ten and wide receiver Jordan Cotton established himself as a bonafide return man on kickoffs. But the one thing that has become apparent this offseason is that Iowa's special teams has a little bit more juice to it.

For years, this was a group co-coached by former assistants Lester Erb and Darrell Wilson, both of whom left the program this offseason. Enter White, who took over Erb's duties coaching running backs and has also become the Hawkeyes' primary special teams coach, along with assistance from co-linebackers coach LeVar Woods and graduate assistant Kelvin Bell.

The one area where Iowa might benefit the most under a new special teams regime is with punt coverage. This spring, the Hawkeyes have run gunner-specific drills during their practices to get those who do see the field in 2013 to work on a craft that could make any of Iowa's younger players impact guys this coming fall.

Probably the biggest beneficiary of this is sophomore punter Connor Kornbrath. He handled a majority of the punting duties last season as a true freshman, but Iowa went with John Wienke in short-yardage punting situations (i.e. any time Iowa was across the 50-yard line). This is the one area Kornbrath will have to show improvement as he now has full punting reign, but he should be even better than before in situations where deep punts will be needed.

Meyer enters his senior year poised to hold onto the kicking duties again in 2013, but he'll continue to be battling with Marshall Koehn, who could be used as a kickoff specialist later this fall.

Then there's the return game. While Cotton will likely be back on kickoffs again like he was last year, the two questions Iowa has to answer are who will be back there with him on kickoff return and who replaces Micah Hyde fielding punts.

As far as kickoff returns are concerned, the name to watch might be sophomore running back Jordan Canzeri, especially if juniors Damon Bullock and Mark Weisman see the majority of the carries in the Hawkeye backfield this fall. Meanwhile, the most likely candidate to handle punt return duties is junior wide receiver Kevonte Martin-Manley. Another name to consider for both is redshirt freshman wideout Riley McCarron, who has shown potential during spring ball.

Special team is definitely an area that could change the complexion of Iowa's 2013 season one way or the other. This has been the case in years past under Kirk Ferentz and even with a new assistant overseeing special teams, this is one thing that probably won't be different any time soon.