

# 2013 Iowa position breakdowns: Offensive Line

*\*This week, HawkeyeDrive.com presents an eight-part series of position breakdowns as the Iowa Hawkeyes continue preparing for the 2013 season. After previously focusing on [quarterbacks](#), [running backs](#) and the group of [wide receivers and tight ends](#), our fourth part examines the team's offensive line.\**

By Brendan Stiles

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The best way to summarize Iowa's offensive line a season ago would be to cut 2012 directly in half. In the season's first half, one that saw the Hawkeyes at 4-2 and even sitting at 2-0 in the Big Ten following a double overtime win at Michigan State, the offensive line played a huge part in that success.

When Iowa beat Northern Illinois, the go-ahead touchdown came on an audible that ended up being a perfectly executed run play with Damon Bullock finding the end zone. During the Hawkeyes' 31-13 thrashing of Minnesota in their Big Ten opener, the offensive line was opening up enormous holes for Mark Weisman and giving the passing game enough time for a flea-flicker to be flawless.

Then came the second half of the season, one that saw Iowa lose all of its final six contests. The losing began on an October night at Kinnick Stadium where the Hawkeyes not only got embarrassed by Penn State, but saw two starting offensive linemen – left tackle Brandon Scherff and right guard Andrew Donnal – suffer season-ending injuries over a four-play span in the first quarter. Once the offensive line was decimated, the entire Iowa offense looked discombobulated.

Mentioning these injuries isn't to excuse Iowa's offensive ineptness during the final weeks of the season and the returning starters up front would tell you as much. But with a team that historically relies on winning those battles in the trenches, not being at full strength most of last season can't go ignored.

"It was challenging, but nobody really dropped their head," Scherff said. "They always kept their head up and I always tried to do the best I could with helping people out during practice and what not. We're going to try to be the best team we could be this coming season."

This year, the offensive line has a slightly new look to it as James Ferentz and Matt Tobin have both moved on. But if Iowa can manage to stay relatively healthy up front, there's enough in place for this group to be a strength in 2013.

The most notable areas of strength are on the outside. On the right side of the line, senior offensive tackle Van Sloten returns after being the only lineman last season to start every game in one spot for the Hawkeyes. Fully recovered from a broken bone in his leg, Scherff returns at left tackle feeling as healthy as he had been prior to that injury.

"We're looking to get back to where we were," Van Sloten said at Big Ten Media Days last month. "Those moments that were great last year, we're looking to have that game after game this year."

It gets more interesting at the inside positions, however. Senior Conor Boffeli appears to be holding down the left guard spot after starting Iowa's final three games of last season at that position and getting the bulk of the first-team reps there during spring practice. The most heated competition right now is at right guard. Sophomore Jordan Walsh currently sits atop the 2-deep, but Donnal remains in the mix to reclaim the spot on the line he had prior to injuring his knee against

Penn State.

Then there's center, which is now occupied by sophomore Austin Blythe. The Williamsburg native started the majority of last season at right guard and now finds himself at the spot he originally worked at upon first joining the Iowa program as a true freshman in 2011. He feels prepared thanks in large part to playing behind and alongside Ferentz the last two years.

"Any questions I had, I was able to ask him and he'd give me a straight answer and it helped me progress as a center," Blythe said. "This year, I'm just trying to build on it, get the repetitions I need and be a better center."

Three other names to keep an eye on in terms of providing depth up front are senior Nolan MacMillan and redshirt freshmen Ryan Ward and Mitch Keppy. Ward and Keppy are both listed at 6-5 and just under 300 pounds. MacMillan has started at various points in his career, but has also been injury-plagued and has been limited in practices thus far.

The players believe the cohesion is in place to become what Blythe described as a "tougher, more physical" offensive line in 2013. The depth and experience are all there. Barring injuries, the potential is there for this to be a more solid group. But it also boils down to what the coaches and players have all harped on this offseason – consistency.

"We have the makings to have a good line," Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz said. "I'm optimistic, but we need to continue to develop players and we need our guys that have played to continue to get better."