

2014 Outback Bowl: One final hurrah for linebacker trio

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

TAMPA, Fla. – When discussing the turnaround from 4-8 in 2012 to 8-4 in 2013, three names from Iowa almost immediately come to mind – James Morris, Christian Kirksey and Anthony Hitchens.

Morris was the first of the three to see the field, and did so right away. Upon filling in for an injured Jeff Tarpinian during Iowa's game against Penn State in 2010, Morris never looked back and for the majority of his career has been settled in at the MIKE (middle) linebacker spot.

Kirksey became a starter in 2011 when he was a true sophomore and initially started out at the WILL (weak-side) spot before moving over to LEO (strong-side) midway through that season. Upon switching to LEO, Kirksey has remained there ever since.

Then there's Hitchens, who got his first shot to start as a junior last season at the WILL position. This opportunity came after he initially arrived on campus as a running back. He moved around from running back to safety to linebacker during his freshman campaign.

When the Hawkeyes take the field Wednesday to play No. 14 LSU in the 2014 Outback Bowl, it will be the last time these three linebackers share the field together. All three took different paths upon arriving in Iowa City back in 2010, yet all three arrived at the same point and provided memories for Hawkeye fans along the way.

"When we all got settled into our position, we all just liked

competing with each other and trying to push each other to be as best as possible," Kirksey said. "Now to see everything develop the way it has, it's a good feeling.

"We just try to keep striving to get better. Just to see James getting better and myself and Hitch, it's a good feeling."

Together, this linebacking trio has accumulated a combined 297 tackles entering Wednesday's game. Between the three of them, they also have a combined eight sacks, six interceptions, six forced fumbles and four fumble recoveries.

"We came in with three linebackers that we expected to play at a high level," Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz said. "They've practiced well and they've really, I think, helped lead our football team."

When studying Iowa's defense on film, LSU head coach Les Miles made note of how all three linebackers play to the scheme put in place by second-year defensive coordinator Phil Parker.

"It's a traditional scheme, but there's nothing traditional about how they play it," Miles said. "Their technique is excellent. They're on their keys.

"They're always in position, physical and fast."

As for the guys themselves, that moment knowing that they'll be wearing an Iowa uniform one final time together has crept up on them. When Morris was asked what he would remember most about playing alongside Kirksey and Hitchens, he made mention of the moments spent away from the gridiron as well as the ones on it.

"Football is fun, but what's special about it is with all the time we spend together, we're able to sort of become closer and become good friends," Morris said. "I think that we've done that over the years.

"I've enjoyed this season and every season up 'till this year.

But that has probably been the most enjoyable part for me, just getting to know those guys and not necessarily the football aspect of it.”

****Be sure to visit HawkeyeDrive.com for ongoing coverage from Tampa, Fla., of the 2014 Outback Bowl between Iowa and No. 14 LSU.***