

3/26/2014: Iowa spring football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the start of the Hawkeyes' 2014 spring football period during a press conference held Wednesday, March 26, 2014, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – If an overriding theme resides with Iowa football as it opens its spring football period Wednesday, it would be stability.

Stability appears rampant on numerous fronts, from the coaching staff in place to the players in place. On the coaching front, Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz spent the last two springs trying to get new assistants acclimated to the players in place and vice versa. He enters this spring having his staff from a year ago fully intact with every position group.

“It’s nice when the players get here and they know ... what they

heard and what they saw is going to be in place throughout their entire career,” Ferentz said during his first media availability of the spring Wednesday. “Philosophically, I don’t think we’re looking for our identity. We have a good idea of who we are and what we want to do.”

It also exists in his players, as evident by the 2-deep put out Wednesday afternoon prior to the Hawkeyes’ first spring practice.

With the exception of a linebacking corps that lost three senior starters, experience reigns supreme among position groups. Whether it’s the entire offensive backfield, the receiving corps, the tight ends, either line or the secondary, there’s some level of stability in place in each spot.

Which is just how Ferentz likes it.

“The good news is we have an opportunity,” Ferentz said. “I think it has been that way most years since I’ve been here, we’ve had an opportunity to be a good football team. But the important thing for our players is to understand that we’ve got a lot of work to do. There’s nothing we can assume.”

So about those linebackers...

Ferentz was asked quite a bit Wednesday about having to replace the trio of James Morris, Christian Kirksey and Anthony Hitchens, and for good reason. The last few instances where major overhaul occurred within the Iowa linebacking corps, seasons of disappointment ensued, whether it was replacing Chad Greenway and Abdul Hodge before a 6-7 2006 campaign or replacing Pat Angerer and A.J. Edds before an 8-5 2010 season where much higher expectations were in place.

If there’s one positive the Hawkeyes have going for them though in terms of replacing three seniors that were the heart and soul of that defense, it’s that the three likely replacements all possess some type of playing experience.

Senior Quinton Alston, junior Travis Perry and sophomore Reggie Spearman all saw the field at various points in 2013. Alston and Spearman both saw playing time increase late last season when Iowa began incorporating its Raider package on third down (Alston was the fourth linebacker, while Spearman lined up at defensive end). Perry also saw the field last season playing special teams and before that saw reps with the first-team defense late in 2012 during a 13-7 loss to Nebraska in the regular season finale.

"The biggest thing, especially in the initial stages, is to encourage guys to be aggressive. Not be afraid to make a mistake," Ferentz said. "It's not a crisis situation if somebody blows an assignment or a coverage at this point in the year."

Lomax switching to free safety

The most notable change within Iowa's spring 2-deep was in the secondary, where junior Jordan Lomax was listed as the first-string free safety, replacing the outgoing Tanner Miller. Lomax began last season as a first-string cornerback, only to get injured in the season opener against Northern Illinois and then witness a then-true freshman in Desmond King take his spot for good.

Ferentz said what prompted him to make this move with Lomax was noticing traits in his game and how they can apply to both the corner and safety positions.

"He's a physical player, he's very intelligent, he has been a honor student since he has been here and communicative that way," Ferentz said. "We worked with him last year in that position, seemed like he took to it pretty naturally."

"It seems like right now, he's the best person for that job."

This won't be the first time Ferentz has tinkered with his secondary during spring ball. In fact, the move Lomax is

making is the exact same position change Iowa experimented with in 2011 with Micah Hyde. At that time, the move was considered to be permanent. But on-field issues at the corner positions resulted in Hyde moving back to corner after only two games and Miller taking over at free safety.

For the time being at least, Ferentz would like to think this move with Lomax will remain permanent.

As for the rest of the secondary, King remains listed as a starter at the corner he took from Lomax last season and Lowdermilk remains first-string at the strong safety spot. The other corner position is currently a two-way battle between sophomore Maurice Fleming (who moved over from wide receiver during his redshirt year in 2012) and junior Sean Draper, who saw limited action early last season when the Hawkeyes used their nickel package on third down.

"I think we have guys at the corner position that look like they're going to have a chance to develop," Ferentz said. "One thing affects the other, there's no doubt about that."

Assembling the offensive line

Although the Hawkeyes are in need of replacing a pair of starters up front, three starters from last season are back, including a guy in Brandon Scherff that Ferentz called "the team's MVP" in 2013.

It was expected that senior Andrew Donnal would be first-string entering this spring given the amount of playing experience he had garnered rotating at various positions across the offensive line. On Wednesday, Ferentz made clear he wanted to see how Donnal would look filling Brett Van Sloten's void at right tackle.

Donnal primarily was used in a rotation alongside Jordan Walsh at right guard last season. Before that was established though, there was a time he was listed behind Scherff at left

tackle.

“Andrew is a player that we think is better suited to play tackle and he did a good job at guard,” Ferentz said. “We have all the confidence in the world he’ll play well for us and I don’t think he’s overwhelmed at all. He’s excited about it and I think he’s totally comfortable out in that position.”

As for the left guard spot, Ferentz said it’s “wide open.” Redshirt freshman Sean Welsh enters the spring listed first-string with Ryan Ward – who looked to be Van Sloten’s replacement at right tackle – listed behind him.

“He made the assimilation pretty ... I don’t want to say effortlessly, but he picked things up quickly and did a lot of good things,” Ferentz said. “He’s a guy in contention.”

Open practice tidbits

For the second straight spring, Iowa will conduct two events open to the public during its spring football period. The first will be the Hawkeyes’ return to West Des Moines Valley High School for an open practice scheduled for April 12 at Valley Stadium. Like last year, tickets will be on sale beginning April 1 around various Central and Western Iowa Hy-Vees, according to a release sent out by the UI Wednesday.

In that same release, it also states a limited number of tickets will be available that same date at both the Herky’s Locker Room inside West Des Moines’ Valley West Mall and at the UI Athletics Ticket Office inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

The second event is the more traditional final spring practice at Kinnick Stadium, scheduled for April 26. Once again, this event will be more of a spring game, with the scoring system implemented by the Hawkeyes during their final spring practice last year.