

2014 Spring Football position breakdowns: Running Backs (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

In years past, the running back stable at Iowa always seemed to have issues arise. Whether it was injuries, suspensions or whatever, there was always something.

Now the depth within this group showed in 2013, but for different reasons. Injuries and suspensions weren't the reasons, but rather Iowa had four running backs that all showcased different strengths. They managed to stay healthy, managed to stay out of trouble and even though the stats may not have always shown it, Iowa had options that it could choose to utilize and did.

The interesting dynamic is that all four of those running backs – Mark Weisman, Damon Bullock, Jordan Canzeri and LeShun Daniels – have returned for this spring and this coming 2014 campaign. While they won't get overworked during spring football, this group is one that will be essential to whether Iowa has success.

When the Hawkeyes started strong, it was because they were pounding the ball down defenses' throats. Two prime examples of this were in wins over Iowa State and Minnesota, as Weisman set a tone in both games. Late in the season, Iowa got back to having success on the ground and this started with Canzeri becoming more involved in the running game and providing a burst the other guys don't have.

But there's another reason for this group being essential to

Iowa's success in 2014. In losses to Michigan State, Wisconsin and LSU, the ground game was virtually non-existent. It didn't matter who was running the ball, as the Hawkeyes couldn't get anything going. If there's a good thing with everyone returning for Iowa, it's that these guys all have a chance to further develop and perhaps fare better against run defenses more stout like those teams were.

As for what to expect going forward, there probably won't be much change. It's going to start with Weisman. Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz made clear he thinks Weisman is a running back and given the developments of both Adam Cox and Macon Plewa at fullback, there's no reason to think Weisman goes back to fullback now.

That being said, this is also a chance for Iowa to work on making Canzeri a bigger part of its ground game. It started doing this late last season and Canzeri rewarded them with big runs and remaining durable. Throw in the fact that he's only a junior compared to Weisman and Bullock both being seniors and this is a huge opportunity for Canzeri to show he can be a No. 1 back in 2015.

Bullock will probably still get his share of carries, but he's a player that can also be effective in the passing game, as evident by his touchdown catch against Michigan State last season that came on a dump-off pass from Jake Rudock. As a pure running back, he probably doesn't warrant as many carries as either Weisman or Canzeri, but there is still a place for him in Greg Davis' offense.

Then there's Daniels. He saw some action as a true freshman last season and one would think that (if healthy) he'll see even more carries this coming season because it'll eventually be him and Canzeri atop the depth chart next year. Right now, there are two things keeping Daniels at the bottom of this 4-man group. One is he doesn't have the experience of the other three backs and the other is he hasn't separated himself yet

from Weisman in terms of burst. He's a bruising running back that can get you the tough yards, but so can Weisman. This isn't to say Daniels won't ever have that burst in his game, but it's not there just yet.

As long as this group can stay healthy, stay out of trouble and show that the durability last season wasn't an anomaly, this running back situation should remain a good problem for Iowa to have.