

2014 Spring Football position breakdowns: Offensive Line (premium)

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Assessing Iowa's offensive line right now is actually more difficult than it would appear. On one hand, it's a group that does return plenty of experience from previous years. But on the other hand, the importance of player development here is probably being understated.

Let's start with the one thing going for the Hawkeyes, which is left tackle Brandon Scherff deciding to return for his senior season. Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz called Scherff "his biggest recruit" following Scherff's decision not to leave early for the NFL and there's good reason. One look at the entire Hawkeye roster and it's clear that Scherff is not only the best player on this team, but perhaps its most important player as well. His presence alone answers some of the concerns that may exist with this unit.

Iowa also has the luxury of returning two other starters in juniors Austin Blythe and Jordan Walsh. After spending most of his playing time at guard as a redshirt freshman, Blythe transitioned back to the center position he was originally brought in to play last year and held down the starting spot. Besides Scherff playing left tackle, Blythe remaining at center is one of the safest bets.

As for Walsh, he started at right guard last year and played the majority of the snaps there, rotating most of the season with Andrew Donnal. Walsh now has the opportunity to hold this position down for good and the question with him is stamina.

Can Walsh handle playing 15-20 additional reps per game than he had before?

The two spots that needed to be filled were right tackle and left guard with Brett Van Sloten and Conor Boffeli both graduating. Ferentz made clear at the start of the spring period he wants to play Donnal (who is a senior) at tackle, a position he always foresaw him playing.

Donnal, like Scherff, suffered a season-ending injury against Penn State in 2012. Unlike Scherff however, Donnal's recovery was more of a challenge, which may have played a role in him not playing as many snaps in 2013. Now that he's the guy filling a major void up front left by Van Sloten, his durability will be critical.

The other major factor with Donnal starting at right tackle is both tackles are seniors. Right now, Cole Croston and Ryan Ward – the guys currently behind both seniors on the 2-deep – don't yet look like players who can just come in and take over in the event either Scherff or Donnal gets hurt this fall. This is where development will be critical for offensive line coach Brian Ferentz.

As for left guard, this is the one spot that might be most up for grabs. Right now, redshirt freshman Sean Welsh appears to be the guy who starts. If he does, having experienced players like Scherff and Blythe on each side of him should help with his transition. Eric Simmons is another player to potentially watch here, as he'll be entering his senior season this fall. At this moment, it appears to be Welsh's spot to lose, depending on how much he develops into the left guard role between now and fall camp.

The good thing for Brian Ferentz is he has depth to work with, more so inside than outside. If Scherff and Donnal both manage to stay healthy this fall, this is an O-line that should get better week-to-week over the course of the 2014 season.

Whatever concerns exist are valid however and again, development (across the board, really) will be essential in whether Iowa can successfully build off an 8-5 campaign.