

2014 Spring Football position breakdowns: Linebackers (premium)

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In 2013, it was the linebacking corps that was counted on to not only lead the Iowa Hawkeye defense, but the entire football team. There was good reason for this as it consisted of a senior trio that all had their best individual seasons last year.

This group is different now though. Gone are James Morris, Christian Kirksey and Anthony Hitchens and make no mistake, all three losses are big. Two of them were team captains and all three made critical plays for the Hawkeyes throughout the course of 2013.

But even with these absences, the coaching done by both Jim Reid and LeVar Woods would suggest not all is doom and gloom with a group consisting of three entirely new starters.

Anchoring down the middle is senior Quinton Alston, who is the most experienced of the three projected starters. Alston started a game in 2012 against Michigan in place of an injured Morris and got to see the field more frequently last season when Iowa began using its Raider package.

For all the limited experience Alston has, he's the most likely defensive player outside of defensive tackles Louis Trinca-Pasat and Carl Davis to emerge as a leader on this defense in 2014. Two facets of Alston's game that Reid said excited him were the confidence he started to show once he saw more playing time and the dedication he has shown in the film

room this offseason and making sure everyone knows where to line up.

The other player Reid said he is excited for is sophomore Reggie Spearman, who will be filling the void at WILL left by Hitchens. Like Alston, Spearman also saw the field as part of the Hawkeyes' Raider look, but did so lined up as a defensive end and in a 3-point stance. The potential with Spearman is high, but what will be interesting to see unfold between now and late August is how he adjusts to being straight up while playing more snaps.

As for LEO, junior Travis Perry will have enormous shoes to fill in replacing Kirksey, a player Woods believes changed the way Iowa should use LEO 'backers moving forward. Perry saw playing time on defense during the Hawkeyes' game against Nebraska in 2012, but has mainly been used on special teams during his career. Now he's being asked to replace a three-year starter who also had a knack for finding the ball and taking it away from opposing offenses.

Something else to watch with this group will be depth. Redshirt freshman John Kenny is a player who could end up playing that role Alston played in the Raider last season and ultimately become his replacement at MIKE in 2015. Another player to potentially keep an eye on in this group is junior Cole Fisher. He might not ever start for the Hawkeyes, but his name has consistently been featured on Iowa's 2-deeps over the past couple of seasons and he would be the next man in if anything happened to either Perry or Spearman.

This group might not play at the same level last year's trio did. But with that in mind, the potential is there for it to be decent, especially if the defensive line in front of it is able to meet its capabilities.