

2014 Spring Football position breakdowns: Special Teams (premium)

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With a new look to special teams in 2013 under running backs coach Chris White and co-linebackers coach LeVar Woods, there were some ups and downs for the Iowa Hawkeyes in football's third phase. The pluses included having a reliable senior kicker in Mike Meyer and wideout Kevonte Martin-Manley had a game against Western Michigan where he returned two punts for touchdowns.

But there were also minuses last season. There were two instances where opposing teams were able to execute fake punts (although Iowa did stop a fake punt attempt by Nebraska late in the year) and it led to head coach Kirk Ferentz wondering allowed whether the Hawkeyes should even bother returning punts. Also, Iowa had issues with kickoff coverage during the early part of the season that did ultimately iron out.

Entering 2014, certain aspects need to be addressed. First and foremost, the Hawkeyes need to settle on a kicker. Marshall Koehn looks to be the likely replacement for the outgoing Meyer, but he finds himself competing with Alden Haffer, a junior college transfer who has a powerful leg. Adding to this is Iowa having a new long snapper in Tyler Culver, who replaces the outgoing Casey Kreiter.

As for punting, Connor Kornbrath got the opportunity to handle punting full-time last season, but his play was termed "inconsistent" by both Ferentz and White. Kornbrath is now competing against a junior college transfer in Dillon Kidd and

there may not be an answer here until the first week of the season whether Kornbrath remains the starting punter.

In the return game, look for Martin-Manley to remain the team's top punt returner. Yes, he had a costly muffed punt against LSU in the Outback Bowl, but he also has the trust of the coaching staff in terms of when to return a punt and when to just let the ball hit the turf and roll. There may also be instances where two punt returners are on the field and in those instances, sophomore receiver Riley McCarron will likely be back there again.

The bigger question though when it comes to returns is who is back deep on kickoffs. When Jordan Cotton wasn't the lone returner, he was joined by running back Jordan Canzeri and for now, Canzeri looks to be the top kickoff returner. But should Canzeri become a bigger part of the Hawkeye offense in 2014, it wouldn't be worth risking injury with him on special teams.

With that in mind, this is where one of the redshirt freshmen receivers Iowa has at its disposal could see the field. Derrick Mitchell, Jr., has been a part of the return rotation on punts this spring and with his speed, this could be his niche until he further develops as a wideout. Another possibility could be Maurice Fleming in the event he gets beat out at corner by Sean Draper. Either way, the possibilities seem endless right now.

The last thing is kickoff coverage, which again, improved over the course of the season last year. This is normally where younger players not seeing the field on offense or defense make their marks and Iowa will continue to need more of that in order to be successful in 2014.

For now, the questions are there. But there's still plenty of time for the Hawkeyes to find answers.