

2014 Iowa position breakdowns: Wide Receivers/Tight Ends

This week, HawkeyeDrive.com presents an eight-part series of position breakdowns as the Iowa Hawkeyes continue preparing for the 2014 season. After previously focusing on [quarterbacks](#) and [running backs](#), our third part examines the team's group of wide receivers and tight ends.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

When looking at these two groups of Hawkeye pass-catchers, there are two striking similarities. One is depth, the other is one specific player emerging.

For really the first time since Greg Davis took over as Iowa's offensive coordinator in 2012, there's reason for Hawkeye fans to be optimistic about their team's passing game. Besides having two experienced signal-callers, the Hawkeyes also have a plethora of experienced receivers and tight ends at their disposal.

The receiving corps features senior wide receiver Kevonte Martin-Manley and junior Tevaun Smith, who ranked first and second respectively last season in total receiving yards. Martin-Manley also led Iowa with 40 receptions in 2013, while Smith averaged nearly 13 yards per catch and as wide receivers coach Bobby Kennedy said, "showed flashes of brilliance" late in the season.

Given the experience both receivers possess, Kennedy has high expectations on them. He also likes the overall make-up of his entire receiving group, which also features players such as

senior Damond Powell, junior Jacob Hillyer and sophomore Matt VandeBerg.

“I think there is more confidence going into the next stage of our development,” Kennedy said. “We’ve been in this offense now for a couple of years, one year with me and two with Coach Davis. So I do see improvement. It’s going to be interesting when we get out here on the field and see what steps they can take.”

But there’s another receiver poised to see the field this fall following a spring where he literally had everyone raving about him – redshirt freshman Derrick Willies. He comes into 2014 listed at 6-4 and weighing 210 pounds. Kennedy and head coach Kirk Ferentz both sang his praises this offseason. Junior quarterback Jake Rudock said Willies is poised to be that breakout player on the Iowa offense in 2014.

“He proved that he could go up and get the ball and he’s a big body,” Rudock said. “But he can also run with the ball. I think that’s really helpful to our offense and hopefully we can keep him going.

“He’s showing that he has good hands and that’s always a good thing for a receiver.”

Then there’s the tight end group. On one hand, it has a big void to fill in 2014 after the Houston Texans drafted C.J. Fiedorowicz last spring. Fiedorowicz led the Hawkeyes with six touchdown catches in 2013.

However, Iowa brings back all four of its other tight ends that saw significant playing time last season. Ray Hamilton enters his senior season, while Jake Duzey and Henry Krieger Coble will be juniors and George Kittle a sophomore.

Based off production last season, one would think Duzey is the most likely tight end to lead the team in receiving this fall. He had the most receptions of this quartet in 2013, which

included an 85-yard touchdown play against Ohio State. But the name being brought up the most is Hamilton, who has developed the reputation of being the best blocking tight end of the bunch and is now poised to make the absence of Fiedorowicz less critical.

"Ray Hamilton is a guy, in my opinion, that is probably better than we think maybe he is," Ferentz said. "Ray has made some nice plays for us. He has done some really good things and I think we've seen him grow last spring.

"Now that there is a little more opportunity out there for him, I expect Ray to take a big step forward with the seniors on offense that we need for leadership. I think he's ready for that."

One thing Hamilton mentioned being of benefit not just to him, but to the other tight ends as well, is their position coach, D.J. Hernandez. This will be Hernandez's second season coaching Iowa's tight ends. It's also the first time Hamilton has experienced any stability with his position coach after having Eric Johnson and David Raih as tight end coaches his freshman and sophomore years.

"There's a certain level of comfortability I guess you could call it as far as me just walking in his office, whether it's on or off the field, just things I need," Hamilton said. "He's always there for me with some good advice and always looking out for me and always doing what's best for the team."

Between these two groups of players, Iowa's passing game should improve. How much improvement is actually made from last season will likely tell the story about 2014.