

2014 Iowa position breakdowns: Linebackers

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](#), [running backs](#), [wide receivers and tight ends](#), the [offensive line](#) and [defensive line](#), our sixth part examines the team's corps of linebackers.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

On the surface, it would appear the Hawkeyes' group of linebackers would be the team's greatest area of concern. After all, Iowa featured a trio of seniors in James Morris, Christian Kirksey and Anthony Hitchens that spent the majority of the last two seasons starting together and embodying everything the Hawkeyes wanted to be defensively.

Iowa enters 2014 having gone a transformation with its linebacking corps. Replacing a trio that included two NFL draft picks isn't going to be easy. But the names taking the field this fall aren't entirely raw, either.

The spot that will be most challenging for the Hawkeyes to fill is the LEO position occupied by Kirksey. Back in the spring, co-linebackers coach LeVar Woods described Kirksey as a player who re-defined the way Iowa uses the position altogether.

Taking on the task of replacing Kirksey is junior linebacker Travis Perry, who played some defensive snaps in a 2012 game against Nebraska, but has mostly been involved on special teams the last two seasons. Perry knows he has a monumental task ahead of him.

“Chris was a great leader both on and off the field,” Perry said. “You know, that’s huge. When you’re a linebacker, you’re kind of forced into that leadership role and to be able to take those things from him and apply them to this year, it’s going to be big.”

Of the three positions, the one head coach Kirk Ferentz is most comfortable about is the MIKE spot, where senior linebacker Quinton Alston is getting his long-awaited opportunity after sitting behind Morris the last three years. Alston first started seeing more and more defensive snaps during the second half of last season when Iowa incorporated both him and sophomore Reggie Spearman in its Raider package that was used on third downs.

Ferentz said Alston had already established himself as a worthy team leader last season as he watched other players gravitate toward him, even while Alston was still a backup.

“It goes all the way back to the preparation, staying in the film room sometimes longer than the starters last year,” Alston said. “I mean, those are great players and I learned from those guys. But you know, just having that confidence in your voice and having that confidence in yourself, I think that goes a long way, too. I think that’s where the respect from my teammates comes from.”

Then there’s Spearman, who was among the select few to play as a true freshman last season. When Spearman was used in the Raider package, he lined up as a defensive end. Now Spearman is taking on the task of filling the void left by Hitchens at the WILL linebacker spot.

Spearman mentioned two people as being the most encouraging as he prepares to step in – Hitchens and co-linebackers coach Jim Reid. Hitchens obviously was instrumental in giving Spearman tips about being as hard-hitting as he was. Reid, on the other hand, is someone Spearman described as developing “a father-

son relationship.”

“Ever since I got here, I’ve always wanted to know more about football and know more about the things we do at Iowa,” Spearman said. “Coach Reid is always around the complex and I’m always around the complex, so he’s just always there.”

Collectively speaking, this linebacking corps is one of Ferentz’s biggest concerns. But with growth, it might not be as glaring a concern as it appears.