

2014 Iowa position breakdowns: Secondary

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](#), [defensive line](#) and [linebackers](#), our seventh part examines the team's secondary.

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In looking at Iowa's last line of defense, there's a mixed bag of encouragement and concern.

The encouragement comes from having two returning starters (and really three returning starters when one considers junior Jordan Lomax), one of whom burst on the scene as a true freshman and now might be the best defensive back on the Hawkeye roster. The concern is depth and while it may not be as major a concern here as it might be with the linebackers, Iowa's in a position where it can ill-afford to lose anyone in its secondary.

At this time last fall, Desmond King was an unknown commodity. In the season opener against Northern Illinois, his redshirt got burned when the coaches threw him in there to replace Lomax, who had injured his hamstring. From that point forward, King became a staple in Iowa's secondary. Now as he eases into his sophomore campaign having already solidified himself as the Hawkeyes' top corner, King looks to have an even bigger impact in 2014.

"There's more room for me to improve," King said. "Right now, I'm working on my speed. We have more receivers in this

conference and dominant speed is the key for cornerback.”

Iowa also brings back senior strong safety John Lowdermilk, who won a heated competition for the spot last season, held his own as the starter and secured the job again this fall. Lowdermilk is the Hawkeyes’ returning leading tackler after compiling 78 of them in 2013.

“We’re really counting on him,” Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz said. “Players have to do things within their own personality. But the way he plays, his attitude and his effort on the practice field, etc., all those things are going to help make him be a logical leader on the defense that he needs to be. He needs to accept that.”

King and Lowdermilk are two definite answers in the defensive backfield. Lomax would be the third, but here’s where questions haven’t been answered yet. The decision was made this spring to move Lomax from corner to free safety, which is something Iowa had done just three years prior with then-junior Micah Hyde.

At the moment, Hyde is the starting free safety for the Green Bay Packers. The irony there is Hyde’s stint as the Hawkeyes’ free safety lasted two games before he was moved back to corner out of necessity, which then paved the way for Tanner Miller. Now fast forward to 2014 and the question with Lomax is similar. It’s not if Lomax is capable of playing free safety – he is, just like Hyde was – but if defensive coordinator Phil Parker will be able to keep him there beyond the first few games.

As for the second corner spot opposite King, the obvious question here is who emerges as the replacement to B.J. Lowery. It’s currently a competition between sophomore Maurice Fleming and junior Sean Draper, with sophomore Greg Mabin being a long shot despite receiving high praise from Parker back in the spring.

Of the three, Draper has played the most defensive snaps as he has been used in Iowa's nickel and dime packages the past two seasons. But Iowa completely abandoned the nickel last season after a loss to Michigan State where Draper was beat badly over the middle and received an earful on the sidelines shortly thereafter.

Then there's the depth. This group took a hit in June when senior Nico Law – who lost the No. 1 strong safety spot to Lowdermilk in 2013, but was being talked about as seeing the field – left the program. Sophomore Anthony Gair is listed behind Lomax at free safety, but the spots behind both King and Lowdermilk are currently filled by redshirt freshmen Malik Rucker and Kevin Ward respectively on Iowa's 2-deep.

If significant injuries are avoided and that second corner spot is solidified by someone not named Lomax, then Iowa's secondary is capable of being a productive unit in 2014. If any one thing goes awry though, there could also be trouble.

"We obviously have to prove ourselves," Lowdermilk said. "Talking's not going to prove a whole lot. You have to go out there and prove you can play and the only way you can do that is to go out there and perform on Saturdays."