

2014 Iowa position breakdowns: Special Teams

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](#), [linebackers](#) and the [secondary](#), our eighth and final part examines the Hawkeyes' special teams.

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Last year, Iowa went through a significant coaching transition when it came to special teams. When running backs coach Chris White was brought onto Kirk Ferentz's coaching staff, he and co-linebackers coach LeVar Woods were teamed up to oversee the team's third phase. More than ever before, time was being spent during practice focusing on all aspects of special teams.

As a whole, there was a mixed bag. Early in the season, there was a game against Western Michigan where Kevonte Martin-Manley returned two consecutive punts for touchdowns and part of his success in that game was Iowa game-planning for the rugby-style punting employed by the Broncos. But this was sandwiched between games that featured opposing teams executing fake punts, onside kick attempts and long kickoff returns.

But the improvement began showing as the season progressed. Against Nebraska, Iowa was prepared for the fake punt and stopped one for the first time since 2009. In the Outback Bowl against LSU, the Hawkeyes got a 96-yard kickoff return from Jordan Cotton that led to a fourth-quarter touchdown that had

kept Iowa's hopes alive.

"Towards the end of the year, I thought we were playing at a pretty high level in both the return units and coverage units," White said.

Now there's another transition taking place with special teams, except it's with player personnel this time around. After having Casey Kreiter as a long snapper for three seasons, those duties are now being held by redshirt freshman Tyler Kluver. After having four seasons of Mike Meyer being a fairly reliable placekicker, the Hawkeyes will likely be turning toward junior Marshall Koehn handling those duties in 2014.

Sitting behind Meyer the last few seasons, Koehn's big takeaways from watching him kick were his poise and mental approach. Those things, along with consistency, are the areas he's currently attempting to apply most to his kicking game.

"I'm just trying to prove that I can handle the pressure because we get put through different situations all through practice and if I miss a kick, I can come back and make another one," Koehn said. "I'm just trying to prove that I can be consistent enough and I think that's what the coaches are looking for."

At punter, Connor Kornbrath returns for his junior season. But after having a sophomore campaign labeled "inconsistent" by both White and head coach Kirk Ferentz, one where Kornbrath averaged 40 yards per punt, Iowa brought in junior college transfer Dillon Kidd to compete with Kornbrath this offseason.

As for the return game, the one thing most likely to remain the same is Martin-Manley entering his senior year as Iowa's top punt returner. He had the game against Western Michigan, but he also had a costly muffed punt against LSU in the Outback Bowl as well. Martin-Manley believes the job is his unless told otherwise.

"I feel comfortable and I feel like it's just another opportunity for the ball to get in my hands and another opportunity to make plays," Martin-Manley said. "Coach Ferentz stresses special teams a lot. Even in our pre-camp meeting, he said special teams has to be an edge for us, so we're probably going to do that this year again."

Kickoff return is a quasi-question mark. Cotton is gone after handling the majority of kickoff return duties in 2013, but late in the season, Iowa began using running back Jordan Canzeri as a second return man. Now Canzeri is listed on the 2-deep as the Hawkeyes' top kick returner, but the question is for how long.

Entering his junior year, Canzeri is now an even more integral part to Iowa's ground game. Depending on how much more he's utilized at running back, Canzeri may or may not remain Plan A on kickoff return.

"If I'm being asked to do more and be put in more positions and I have a lot of weight on my shoulders, it just means having more trust in my hands," Canzeri said. "It's something that I'm glad to have and I'm willing to do whatever I can."

Should the decision be made at any point during the season to take Canzeri off kickoff return because he's playing that big of a role in Iowa's offense, younger players will likely emerge for the Hawkeyes. White immediately referenced a pair of redshirt freshmen running backs as likely replacements should this scenario unfold.

"[Canzeri's] not going to carry it 40 times a game, he's not geared that way, but I would still feel comfortable putting him there," White said. "But I'm really excited to see [Akrum] Wadley and Jonathan Parker get their hands on a ball on a kickoff return."