

2014 Big Ten football previews: Iowa

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As the 2014 season inches closer, we have discussed every single Big Ten team except for one. Our series of season previews concludes today with the Iowa Hawkeyes, who come off an 8-5 2013 season capped by a 21-14 loss to LSU in the Outback Bowl.

There's a saying about how history tends to repeat itself and following a season where Iowa doubled its win total from the year prior, history is factoring into why expectations surrounding the Hawkeyes are high this fall. Because 2013 gets compared to years like 2001, 2003 and 2008, the natural inkling is that 2014 can be like 2002, 2004 and 2009, seasons where Iowa won a share of the Big Ten and/or played in a major bowl game. With that in mind, the question becomes this – how does this 2014 team look compared to those other highly successful squads coached by Kirk Ferentz?

Below is a list of 10 traits/observations the 2002, 2004 and 2009 squads all share in common beyond winning double-digit games:

1. All three teams featured quarterbacks entering their first full seasons as starters after gaining some playing experience as back-ups the year before. Brad Banks followed Kyle McCann in 2002. Drew Tate followed Nathan Chandler in 2004. Ricky Stanzi unseated Jake Christensen for good in 2008 once non-conference play concluded and after starting 11 games, went into his first full season as the starter in 2009.

2. All three teams had junior wide receivers that led the team

in receptions. Mo Brown led the Hawkeyes in all three of receptions, receiving yards and receiving touchdowns in 2002. Ed Hinkel led the Hawkeyes in receptions and receiving touchdowns (senior Clinton Solomon led in receiving yards) in 2004. Derrell Johnson-Koulianos led the Hawkeyes in receptions and receiving yards (sophomore Marvin McNutt led in receiving touchdowns) in 2009.

3. All three teams had tight ends taken in the following year's NFL Draft. Dallas Clark and Tony Moeaki both go without saying. Scott Chandler was only a sophomore in 2004, but the Hawkeyes had another tight end that season in Tony Jackson, who was taken in the 2005 NFL Draft by the Seattle Seahawks.

4. All three teams had upperclassmen predominantly starting at both offensive tackle spots. In 2002, it was Robert Gallery and David Porter. In 2004, it was Lee Gray and Pete McMahon. In 2009, it was Bryan Bulaga (when healthy) and Kyle Calloway (for all but two games).

5. All three teams had at least one defensive lineman and one safety go on to play in the NFL. In 2002, the front four featured Colin Cole (who still plays for the Carolina Panthers) and Iowa also had Derek Pagel and Bob Sanders playing the two safety spots. In 2004, Jonathan Babineaux and Matt Roth both had their names called in the 2005 NFL Draft, while Sean Considine was at free safety and went on to have a lengthy pro career. In 2009, Iowa's D-line featured three juniors that would all get drafted in 2011, plus Tyler Sash at strong safety.

6. All three had at least two returning starters at linebacker. In 2002, it was Fred Barr and Grant Steen. In 2004, it was Chad Greenway and Abdul Hodge. In 2009, it was Pat Angerer, A.J. Edds and Jeremiha Hunter.

7. All three had little question entering the season about whom would handle punting and kicking duties. David Bradley

was the returning punter for both the 2002 and 2004 seasons, while Ryan Donahue returned in 2009 after handling punting the previous two years. Nate Kaeding in 2002 goes without saying. Kyle Schlicher had established himself as Kaeding's replacement in 2004 and there wasn't any doubt in 2009 about Daniel Murray being Iowa's kicker.

8. All three teams had victories over the following Big Ten teams – Penn State, Michigan State, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

9. All three teams went undefeated during the month of October. The combined October record between the three teams is 13-0.

10. Since Kirk Ferentz took over in 1999, these are the only three Hawkeye teams to win back-to-back road games in consecutive weeks. In 2002, Iowa followed up a win at Indiana with its memorable 34-9 thumping of Michigan in The Big House. In 2004, Iowa won that infamous 6-4 game at Penn State and then won at Illinois the following week. In 2009, the Hawkeyes won at Wisconsin 20-10, then won 15-13 in the final seconds at Michigan State the very next Saturday.

Now let's look at the 2014 team and assess whether it features any of the similar traits:

1. At quarterback, there's an intriguing difference. Junior quarterback Jake Rudock returns after starting every game in 2013. Yes, C.J. Beathard made five appearances in relief last season, but Rudock started every game. Now again, Stanzi did start 11 games in 2008, but he didn't go into that season as the starting quarterback. There may have been a QB competition last year, but there was never a doubt Rudock would get the nod. Rudock has definitely shown improvements from last year, but how much those improvements show this fall will be interesting to see since there's more film of him now than there was of Banks, Tate or Stanzi heading into those other three seasons.

2. Junior wideout Tevaun Smith is certainly capable of becoming a No. 1 target of Rudock's this fall, but can he actually haul in more catches this season than senior Kevonte Martin-Manley barring injuries to either guy? Martin-Manley has led Iowa in receptions each of the past two seasons and it would be somewhat surprising if he didn't again in 2014. How much better Smith becomes over the course of this fall could be telling with this Hawkeye offense.

3. Tight end is the strongest group on this year's roster with four players Ferentz knows he can count on at any given moment. This group features one senior – Ray Hamilton. The question here would be this – is Hamilton capable of being drafted next spring, even if he doesn't end up leading this group in any receiving categories? If he is, that's an encouraging sign.

4. Here's one area of common ground and it's pretty important. Iowa not only has two upperclassmen at both tackle spots, but unlike those other three teams, both are seniors in Andrew Donnal and Brandon Scherff. Donnal falls in line with David Porter, Pete McMahon and Kyle Calloway in that all of them were seniors at right tackle. It's Scherff at left tackle that's different and Ferentz has already said on record that Scherff might go down as one of the best players Iowa has ever had.

5. On the defensive line, Carl Davis certainly looks like someone who should probably hear his name called during the NFL Draft next spring. The question here is whether John Lowdermilk or Jordan Lomax (or both) are capable of being NFL players themselves one day? Lowdermilk has the pedigree as his father Kirk played 12 seasons in the NFL. Lomax is playing free safety for the first time since high school and is coming off a season hampered by a hamstring injury. What Iowa gets from these two this season will loom large.

6. The biggest difference this team has with those other three

is lack of returning experience at linebacker. In fact, none of the three starters were players who started last season. This is pretty well-documented, so not much more needs to be said about this.

7. Here's another big difference – there's uncertainty with special teams. Junior Marshall Koehn looks to be the guy handling PATs, field goals and kickoffs in 2014, but Ferentz still hasn't said it's his to lose. Meanwhile, junior Connor Kornbrath handled Iowa's punting in 2014, but it's no guarantee he keeps that job given how junior college transfer Dillon Kidd has looked since arriving on campus.

8. Iowa won't play Penn State this season and can only play Michigan State if the two meet in the Big Ten Championship Game this December. The Hawkeyes do play both Minnesota and Wisconsin, however, and both those rivalry games come in the month of November.

9. The Hawkeyes only have two games during the month of October this season. On paper, both games appear to be winnable for Iowa with Indiana visiting Kinnick Stadium on Oct. 11 and the Hawkeyes then taking a trip to Maryland on Oct. 18. But the Hoosiers possess one of the most potent offenses in the Big Ten and the Terrapins feature the conference's best receiver duo in Stefon Diggs and Deon Long. Even with just two games, October will still be a crucial month for Iowa and especially for its defense.

10. Iowa has two pairs of back-to-back road games this season, meaning two opportunities to match those other three teams. The first chance comes in late September with road games at Pittsburgh and Purdue. Oddly enough, the only two times Iowa has ever followed up a non-conference road game with a Big Ten road game the following week under Ferentz, the Hawkeyes went 0-2 on both occasions (2004 to Arizona State and Michigan, 2007 to Iowa State and Wisconsin). The second chance comes in November with back-to-back road games at Minnesota and

Illinois. The odds of Iowa winning all four of these road contests are slim, but either a (more than likely) 5-0 start to the season or a winning streak of at least two games entering that mammoth showdown against Wisconsin on Nov. 22 would go a long way in the Hawkeyes' quest to play for a Big Ten crown on Dec. 6.

As this all pertains to Iowa's current situation, there's a mixed bag. Some pieces are in place (mainly along both sides of the line of scrimmage), but some stars will need to align once again and a few firsts would have to happen in order for this current version of the Hawkeyes to reach that same level.

Can a quarterback who is proven like Rudock have the same type of success catching defenses off-guard like those others did? Can Smith raise his game to where he's talked about as Iowa's top receiving threat? Can Hamilton evolve into an NFL-caliber tight end if he's not one already? Can either Lowdermilk or Lomax evolve into NFL-caliber safeties if they aren't already? Can this defense succeed with a group of linebackers that have nowhere near the same playing experience? Can this team have success despite entering the season with kicking and punting concerns? Can this team win key rivalry games, show it can go on the road two consecutive weeks without losing, and avoid losing games during what appear to be key stretches in the season?

All of these questions could have a "Yes" answer by season's end and this would be a very successful season for Iowa if they do, but there also doesn't appear to be much margin of error. Given what this team brings back, what its schedule looks like and everything that has already been written and said about it, Iowa should match last year's win total and perhaps even improve off it.

But in order to reach that pantheon featuring those 2002, 2004 and 2009 squads, the 2014 Iowa Hawkeyes now have to show they can take that next step like those teams did. They need

history to repeat itself.

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