

2014 Big Ten football previews: Ohio State (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

So far, we have previewed [Penn State](#), [Rutgers](#) and [Michigan](#). The next Big Ten team we will examine is the Ohio State Buckeyes. Iowa does not play Ohio State in 2014.

Like they do most years, Ohio State had enormously high expectations in 2013 and nearly met them. For the second straight year under Urban Meyer, the Buckeyes went 12-0 in the regular season. But the season's end left a sour taste in Ohio State fans as the Buckeyes first lost the Big Ten Championship Game to Michigan State, then proceeded to give up 35-plus points for the first time ever in a 40-35 loss to Clemson in the Orange Bowl.

Now entering 2014, those same high expectations exist in Columbus. Ohio State will most likely be the highest-ranked Big Ten team when all the preseason polls are out and will be considered by many to be the conference's best shot to make the new four-team College Football Playoff. But whether it actually does or not is another story.

Let's start with the absolute best thing that could have happened to the Buckeyes this offseason, which was quarterback Braxton Miller opting to return for his senior season. Miller was the Big Ten's Most Valuable Player each of the past two years, but it was his passing that made the most strides in 2013 as he completed 63.5 percent of his passes for 2,094 yards and tossed 24 touchdowns to seven interceptions.

Miller still remains a threat to beat defenses with his feet as he posted 12 rushing touchdowns in 2013, but Ohio State is going to need someone to emerge in the backfield with Carlos Hyde no longer around. All Hyde did was average 138.3 rushing yards per game, more than any other Big Ten back. He also had 1,521 yards and 15 touchdowns on the ground to lead the Buckeyes.

Hyde's likely replacement at running back is sophomore Ezekiel Elliott, who had 262 yards rushing on 30 carries last year. Another player who burst on the scene last year and will likely have an even bigger role in Ohio State's offense is sophomore Dontre Wilson, who is listed as a H-Back a la Percy Harvin when he played for Meyer at Florida.

The Buckeyes lost their top receiver from last season in Corey Brown, but still possess three senior playmakers – two wideouts and one tight end – that Miller will be dependent on. Wide receiver Devin Smith caught 44 passes for 660 yards receiving and eight touchdowns, all of which were second to Brown. Joining him in the receiving corps is Evan Spencer, who had 22 grabs for 216 yards and three scores. Then there's tight end Jeff Heuerman, who finished with 26 receptions, 466 yards and four TDs.

On offense, the most glaring concern with Ohio State is up front as it lost four seniors from a year ago. The only returnee is junior Taylor Decker, who started at right tackle and has since moved over to left tackle. The Buckeyes also have the arrival of Alabama transfer Chad Lindsay to look forward to this fall. Lindsay is eligible to play for Ohio State in 2014 after starting four games at center for the Crimson Tide last season.

Defensively, the Buckeyes revamped themselves by hiring Chris Ash away from Arkansas as their new co-defensive coordinator alongside Luke Fickell. Ash inherits a unit that has been atrocious against the pass since Meyer took over, but this

current group features perhaps the best defensive line in the entire country and will have first-year assistant Larry Johnson (formerly the D-line coach at Penn State) working with them.

This front four accounted for 24.5 sacks in 2013. Eight of those sacks came courtesy of junior defensive end Noah Spence, who led the Buckeyes and was second in the Big Ten. Right behind him with 7.5 sacks was sophomore defensive end Joey Bosa, who started 10 games as a freshman last season. Inside, the Buckeyes have senior Michael Bennett and junior Adolphus Washington. Without question, this is Ohio State's best group of players.

As for the linebacking corps, it has an enormous void to fill after Ryan Shazier – who led the Big Ten with 143 tackles (101 solo) in 2013 – opted to leave early for the NFL. This group will be led in 2014 by senior middle linebacker Curtis Grant and junior weak-side 'backer Joshua Perry. These two combined for 116 tackles last season, or 27 less than Shazier had by himself.

The secondary was Ohio State's weak link in 2013 and its two bright spots from last season both left early for the NFL. The Buckeyes do bring back senior cornerback Doran Grant, but are looking at two new safeties in 2014. Along with the offensive line, this is the one area that gives pause.

On special teams, Ohio State brings back a pretty reliable punter in sophomore Cameron Johnston. His 44 yards per punt led all Big Ten punters last season. The Buckeyes will also have the aforementioned Wilson back returning kickoffs and punts. They will need to fill a void at kicker with Drew Basil gone.

As far as the schedule is concerned, this is the one reason why Ohio State has the best chance of any Big Ten team to make the College Football Playoff. Unlike Wisconsin and Michigan

State, the Buckeyes' marquee non-conference game happens to be at the Horseshoe when Virginia Tech visits Sept. 6.

October features a pair of road games at Maryland on Oct. 4 and Penn State on Oct. 25 and those just might be the two biggest obstacles in the way of Ohio State being undefeated when it visits Michigan State on Nov. 8. Last year, that was the Big Ten Championship Game and the Spartans prevailed. This year, that match-up will most likely decide the Big Ten East Division and it's at Spartan Stadium.

If the Buckeyes get their payback against Michigan State, there's no reason for think they can't find themselves back in the same scenario as a year ago where the Big Ten Championship Game in Indianapolis decides whether or not they'll advance. The question, however, is will Ohio State actually be able to do just that and given what both it and Michigan State present, there's reason to be skeptical of that.

This team should be every bit as good as the last two teams Meyer has coached. It's just difficult to envision the Buckeyes getting over that hump.

AUDIO:

Ohio State quarterback Braxton Miller –

<http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Braxton-Miller-2014-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>

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 LE0 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.

2014 Big Ten football previews: Michigan (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

After examining [Penn State](#) and [Rutgers](#), the next Big Ten team we will preview is the Michigan Wolverines. Iowa does not play Michigan in 2014.

There’s no other way to put it other than Michigan took a step back in 2013. The Wolverines weren’t a team that was expected to win the now-defunct Legends Division last season, but 2013 was a year to forget as Michigan went 7-6 and lost the Buffalo Wild Wings Bowl to Kansas State.

Brady Hoke enters his fourth season as head coach and some are already saying he’s on the hot seat. In examining the Wolverines closer, they’re probably the third best team in the Big Ten East right now and quite honestly, 2015 could be a big year for Michigan assuming Hoke is still allowed to see everything through.

The Wolverines have a new offensive coordinator in Doug

Nussmeier, who joins Hoke's staff after previously holding the same position at Alabama on Nick Saban's staff. Nussmeier has the task of getting a bounce-back season out of senior quarterback Devin Gardner.

Gardner's numbers weren't necessarily terrible. He threw for 2,960 yards and 21 touchdowns and also had 11 rushing touchdowns for the Wolverines while being their second-leading rusher in 2013. But Michigan lost five of its last six games and a lot of that fell on the offense and more specifically, Gardner.

If Gardner isn't able to mesh right away with Nussmeier, this could be another long season for the Wolverines offensively. They no longer have Fitz Toussaint in the backfield and will likely be relying on sophomore Derrick Green and junior Justice Hayes to account for most of the ground game production in 2014. Hayes was very limited last season despite starting the bowl game against Kansas State. Meanwhile, Green had 270 yards rushing on 83 carries.

The other issue Michigan has offensively is inexperience at wide receiver with Jeremy Gallon no longer around. In fact, the one bright spot in the Wolverine passing game is a tight end that will likely be lining out wide even more in 2014. Funchess had 49 catches for 748 yards receiving and six touchdowns, all three of which were second on the team to Gallon. Throw in that fellow sophomore tight end Jake Butt is currently rehabbing from knee surgery and Michigan's entering the fall with Funchess being the only sure option at its disposal on offense.

Up front, the Wolverines' three interior spots are filled with veterans. Junior Graham Glasgow started all 13 games last season, but moved over from left guard to center when Big Ten play began. Sophomore guards Erik Magnuson and Kyle Kalis are being counted on to fill the left and right spots, respectively. The problem Michigan has is the two positions

where there was continuity last season have major voids. Taylor Lewan started every game at left tackle and was a first round pick of the Tennessee Titans last spring, while Michael Schofield has also moved on to the NFL after starting at right tackle.

While the offense has uncertainty, the reason for Michigan fans to be excited about 2014 is the Wolverine defense. The one area of concern might be along the defensive line because it no longer features Jibreel Black inside. But senior Frank Clark returns after starting every game at defensive end last season and having a year where he compiled 43 tackles, including 12 for lost yardage, and two fumble recoveries. Also returning is senior defensive end Brennen Beyer, who is now along the front four for good after making the transition from linebacker during the middle of last season.

Speaking of the linebackers, this is what should excite Michigan fans the most. All three of the Wolverines' starters are back including senior Jake Ryan, who was slowed by an ACL injury last season after compiling 88 tackles in 2012. Along with Ryan are middle linebacker Desmond Morgan and junior weak-side 'backer James Ross III to help form perhaps the best trio of linebackers in the Big Ten.

The secondary returns three starters, including a pair of cornerbacks that combined for 10 interceptions in 2013. Senior Raymon Taylor also led the Wolverines in tackles with 86 of them last season, while junior Blake Countess had his six-interception campaign after taking an injury redshirt in 2012. Junior free safety Jarrod Wilson also returns and Michigan only lost two games in which he started last season. The Wolverines also brought in one of the nation's top recruits in defensive back Jabril Peppers, who will likely be used as a nickel back to start this upcoming season.

On special teams, senior Will Hagerup returns as punter after having to redshirt 2013. As a result, senior Matt Wile will

likely be the Wolverines' new place-kicker after he handled punting duties in Hagerup's place last season. Junior wideout Dennis Norfleet will handle return duties again in 2014 after finishing second to Gallon in all-purpose yards.

In terms of the schedule, Michigan has a pretty favorable draw at The Big House. It opens the season hoping to exorcise the demons of 2007 when Appalachian State visits. The Wolverines also draw Utah at home before starting Big Ten play and their Big Ten home slate features Minnesota, Penn State under the lights, Indiana and Maryland.

But it's the road that looks absolutely daunting. Michigan's final game for the foreseeable future against Notre Dame is Sept. 6 in South Bend and the Fighting Irish will have Everett Golson back at QB. The Wolverines' first road game in Big Ten play is in prime time against Rutgers on Oct. 4, but then they also have to visit both Michigan State and Northwestern for the second straight year, plus "The Game" against Ohio State is at The Horseshoe, where Michigan hasn't won since 2000.

This year looks like one that could be similar to 2012, where Michigan went 8-4 and ended up in the Outback Bowl against South Carolina. As long as the Wolverine defense is as stingy as advertised, Michigan should be able to stay in every game this fall. The big question again will be how much can Gardner and the offense get over the hump and put the Wolverines in a position to enter 2015 as one of the conference's favorites.

AUDIO:

Michigan linebacker Jake Ryan –

<http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Jake-Ryan-2014-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>

2014 Iowa position breakdowns: Defensive Line

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](#), and the [offensive line](#), our fifth part examines the defensive line.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

Iowa's front four had a resurgence of sorts in 2013 and as the Hawkeyes enter 2014, it's a group not only returning plenty of experience, but also leadership.

Last season, the face of this defense was its senior trio of linebackers. This fall, it will be reminiscent of 2008 with a pair of senior defensive tackles leading the charge. It was Mitch King and Matt Kroul back then. It is Louis Trinca-Pasat and Carl Davis now. Both have some subtle differences, but both have also allowed their play to speak for itself.

"Carl's nature is more, 'Hey listen, I want to help you along and I'm going to bring you along,' but Louie's going to drag you," Iowa defensive line coach Reese Morgan said. "So you've got two different leadership styles. Both are effective."

Trinca-Pasat has been a fixture along the D-line for two seasons now. He played all of 2012 with a torn rotator cuff and managed to elevate his game even more last year as he finished with 38 tackles, including eight tackles for lost

yardage. Morgan described him as high-energy and the kind of guy who wouldn't be afraid to call a teammate out for poor effort.

For Davis, his development made a quantum leap in 2013. He embraced the responsibility that came with playing a bigger role and it showed in his game as he compiled 42 tackles in his first season as a starter. Both players say they try to lead by example, but Davis believes Trinca-Pasat is the more vocal of the two.

"I talk like it's fun, I'm having fun and we're on the field before practice trying to get guys going and stuff like that," Davis said. "In the games, I don't talk at all unless it's a real tight situation.

"If we're slacking, that's where Louie picks it up. If we're slow coming into practice, Louie's like, 'Hey, we need to pick this tempo up.' That's the kind of guy he is."

Trinca-Pasat and Davis are the cornerstones of the 2014 Iowa defense, but they're not alone in terms of what they mean to the defensive line. Another player who has received high praise throughout the offseason has been junior defensive end Drew Ott, who statistically speaking had more tackles (50) and more sacks (2.5) than his two fellow D-linemen inside.

Morgan and Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz both took notice of Ott this past spring when he willingly asked to switch from left to right defensive end so he could go head-to-head with senior left tackle Brandon Scherff every day in practice. Ott is listed at 6-4, 270 pounds, but by all accounts held his own against Scherff when they battled every day in practice.

"I'm a lot more focused every time I put my hand in the ground," Ott said. "Lining up against him, I got to be focused, otherwise I'm going to get flattened. It has just helped my sharpness and being ready to go every snap."

The big question surrounding this front four is who controls the other end spot, with senior Mike Hardy being the likely candidate to start. Hardy started Iowa's last six games and entered fall camp listed atop the 2-deep at the end spot opposite Ott.

Like Iowa has each of the last three seasons, it will continue using a heavy rotation of 7-8 players along the D-line. Junior defensive end Nate Meier showed glimpses last season when he was used in the Hawkeyes' Raider package on third down and spent the entire spring competing with Hardy.

The Hawkeyes also have a trio of defensive tackles at their disposal should they choose to rotate Trinca-Pasat or Davis out at any point. Darian Cooper has been a regular in the Iowa rotation each of the last two seasons and will continue to be in 2014. Two other names to watch for this fall as part of the Hawkeyes' rotation are sophomores Jaleel Johnson and Faith Ekakitie. Johnson is a defensive tackle, while Ekakitie has played both tackle and end, but said he is better suited playing at tackle.

"It's where I came in and it's where I got started," Ekakitie said. "I moved out to end for a little bit, then moved back in, so I'd say there's a little more comfort at tackle."

Between its two senior tackles, as well as Ott, this D-line will be counted on as the tone setters for Iowa in 2014.

2014 Big Ten football

previews: Rutgers (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

After looking at [Penn State](#) on Friday, we turn our attention to previewing the upcoming season for one of the Big Ten's two newest members, the Rutgers Scarlet Knights. Iowa does not play Rutgers in 2014.

The anticipation of Rutgers joining the Big Ten has begun to subside and simply put, this is going to be a long season for the Scarlet Knights.

Yes, Rutgers has appeared in three straight bowl games and has gone to a bowl eight of the last nine years after having only been to one bowl game before 2005. It speaks volumes to what Greg Schiano was able to build there and what Kyle Flood has since been able to maintain. But this first season in the Big Ten is going to be daunting for Flood, who is now in his third year as the Scarlet Knights' head coach.

Offensively, Rutgers has a new offensive coordinator in former Maryland head coach Ralph Friedgen, who is returning to coaching this fall after a three-year hiatus. He inherits an offense with nine returning starters, but this offense was 95th nationally in total offense last season and has a question mark at quarterback.

Senior Gary Nova was recently named Rutgers' starting quarterback for 2014. He started the Scarlet Knights' first 10 games, but was benched in favor of Chas Dodd for the final three contests, including the Pinstripe Bowl loss to Notre Dame. The big issue with Nova has been accuracy as he has yet to complete 60 percent of his passes in a single season and threw 30 interceptions over the 23 consecutive games he started between 2012-2013.

Nova will have some help in his backfield though with senior fullback Michael Burton and junior running back Paul James both returning. Burton is one of the team's most highly-regarded players while James is coming off a season where he appeared in nine games and rushed for 881 yards and nine touchdowns on 156 carries.

Rutgers also returns senior tight end Tyler Kroft, who actually led the Scarlet Knights in both receptions and receiving yards, hauling in 43 catches 573 yards. He also had four touchdown receptions, which tied for second on the team. Junior wideout Leonte Carroo led Rutgers with nine touchdown receptions and both he and sophomore Ruhann Peele had 28 catches each last season. Another name to watch in the receiving corps is sophomore Andre Patton, who started a pair of games as a true freshman in 2013.

If this offense has any strength, it might be up front as the Scarlet Knights return all five of their starting offensive linemen. In the four games they all started together last season, Rutgers won three of them (the lone loss came at Louisville). Senior left guard Kaleb Johnson and junior left tackle Keith Lumpkin started all 13 games in 2013, while sophomore right guard Chris Muller made 12 starts and senior right tackle Taj Alexander made 11 starts. Senior center Betim Bujari started seven games at center last season.

The offense has high hopes, but defense is a major concern with Rutgers. Although the Scarlet Knights boasted one of the nation's top run defenses in 2013, their pass defense was one of the nation's worst as it surrendered 312 yards through the air per contest.

The front four is led by junior defensive tackle Darius Hamilton, who was second among all Scarlet Knight defensive linemen last season with 48 tackles and 4.5 sacks. Rutgers will have to fill the void left by Marcus Thompson, who led the team in both defensive categories last season.

If there's a reason to think the defense might be better, it would be because of the linebacking corps. As a redshirt freshman last season, Steve Longa started every game at middle linebacker and led the Scarlet Knights with 123 tackles. The team's second-leading tackler also returns in senior Kevin Snyder, who had 96 of them. Junior Quentin Gause will likely be a full-time starter on the strong side this fall after he was fourth on the team in tackles despite only making one start.

Then there's the secondary, which got burned quite a bit in 2013. Senior strong safety Lorenzo Waters had 62 tackles last season and also tied for a team-high four pass break ups with sophomore cornerback Anthony Cioffi. Outside of Waters though, none of the other experienced players have established themselves to this point.

On special teams, Rutgers will be fielding a new punter in junior Joe Field and while junior kicker Kyle Federico is back to handle field goals and PATs, he'll also be handling kickoffs on a full-time basis now. Sophomore wideout Janarion Grant left his mark in the return game last season with two touchdown returns (one punt and one kickoff) and will be handling return duties again in 2014.

Despite returning quite a bit of personnel, one look at Rutgers' schedule is all one needs to justify why the Scarlet Knights will struggle this season. First, they open the season in Seattle against a Washington State squad that is very pass-oriented and if improvements haven't been made to the pass defense, that game may just be the tip of the iceberg. The Scarlet Knights also have a road game at Navy, which follows their Big Ten opener at home against Penn State on Sept. 13.

That game against Penn State might also be Rutgers' best chance at a win in Big Ten play. The Scarlet Knights also play Indiana at home later in the season, but that game could be disaster depending on the pass defense. Michigan and Wisconsin

both visit High Point Solutions Stadium this fall as well and both will be favored against Rutgers.

Then there's the road slate, which is easily the most brutal road schedule of any Big Ten team. In October, Rutgers plays a pair of back-to-backs against Ohio State and Nebraska away from New Brunswick. The season then concludes with two straight road games against defending Big Ten champion Michigan State and the league's other new member, Maryland.

As it stands now, Rutgers might be the worst team in the East Division and going 0-8 in conference play isn't far-fetched. More so than with Maryland, this is truly going to be a transition year for Flood and his program and it will likely be a few seasons before the Scarlet Knights have any real shot at vying for a Big Ten title.

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By Brendan Stiles

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Brandon Scherff might not be seeking the attention coming his way. But after being at Big Ten Media Days in Chicago last month, that attention has only magnified greater.

It began in the spring when offensive line coach Brian Ferentz called him the best offensive lineman in college football last season. Then came the video of Scherff hang-cleaning 443 pounds just before he went to Chicago for Big Ten Media Days last week. After that came Kirk Ferentz saying at Big Ten Media Days – and reiterating again Monday – how Scherff could go down as one of Iowa's best players ever.

Just in the last few weeks, ESPN's Travis Haney wrote Scherff is "[the best player in college football](#)" and NFL.com's Gil Brandt said Scherff [has a realistic chance of being the top pick in next year's draft](#). One person who saw the potential in Scherff was the man who recruited him and was originally his position coach.

Before handling duties coaching Iowa's defensive line, Reese Morgan was the lead recruiter and Scherff and raved about his potential all the way back in 2010 when Scherff first arrived on the UI campus. Seeing the publicity Scherff has received has not come as a surprise for Morgan, who has also coached players like Robert Gallery, Bryan Bulaga and Riley Reiff

during his Iowa tenure.

"He's probably, athletically, as good as any tackle that we've had here," Morgan said. "Brandon is explosive, powerful. He has done some things in the weight room that none of those guys have done. He has done some things on the football field that none of those guys have done."

The Hawkeyes have a legitimate Outland Trophy candidate returning at left tackle. So naturally, the one spot on the offensive line that is currently an unknown is right next to Scherff at left guard. The "who" isn't necessarily the unknown because Sean Welsh has been listed since the start of spring as the first-string left guard. The unknown is that Welsh is a redshirt freshman and the only first-string offensive lineman who hasn't played a snap in a real game.

With this season likely being his first taste of game experience at the college level, the one piece of advice Welsh said he has gotten from the older linemen to accept the mistakes he'll inevitably make.

"When I first came in here, I wasn't used to making mistakes," Welsh said. "You're going to make mistakes and you've got to accept them because that's the best way you're going to learn."

As for the rest of this group, there's good and bad news for Iowa. The good is having three experienced linemen controlling the center and right sides of the line. Junior center Austin Blythe returns to anchor the line after making the transition over to center from guard last year.

The right side features a pair of linemen that rotated at the same spot last season and will now start together in 2014. After always being that "next man in" the last three seasons at various spots up front, senior Andrew Donnal is finally getting his opportunity at right tackle, where he replaces a two-year starter in Brett Van Sloten. Both he and his head

coach believe tackle has always been the best-suited position for Donnal to play.

Donnal getting his shot at right tackle also means junior Jordan Walsh is going to get even more snaps as the starting right guard than he did in 2013. Kirk and Brian Ferentz both believe Walsh is poised to make a jump this season similar to what they saw last year from center Austin Blythe.

“He had a good spring, he had a good summer, he has done everything we’ve asked, he’s on the right track right now,” Brian Ferentz said. “I fully expect over the next 2-3 weeks that he’ll demonstrate a little bit more consistency and then as we progress in the season, I see the same thing happening.

“It’s up to him to continue on the track he has been on, but so far, it has been very encouraging.”

The bad news is lack of depth because after the five first-string guys, there’s a significant drop-off in terms of experience. This is something that has concerned both Kirk Ferentz and offensive coordinator Greg Davis all offseason. In fact, Davis called the lack of depth his biggest concern with the entire offense back in the spring.

Currently, the second group primarily consists of the following blend – redshirt freshmen, older players who have never played meaningful minutes in a game and walk-ons.

Iowa’s offensive line has potential to be considered a strength in 2014, but only if the Hawkeyes can avoid major injuries up front. With Scherff’s presence, it’s also a group that will be watched closer than it ever has since Brian Ferentz first took over as offensive line coach back in 2012.

2014 Big Ten football previews: Penn State (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

The first team I'll discuss in our series of Big Ten season previews is the Penn State Nittany Lions. Iowa does not play Penn State in 2014.

After decades of coaching stability, Penn State finds itself in a unique situation with having its second head coach in three years after former Vanderbilt coach James Franklin took over for the outgoing Bill O'Brien, who left State College to coach the NFL's Houston Texans.

On the recruiting trail, Franklin is already leaving his mark on both the Big Ten and the entire Eastern seaboard of the country. From a business perspective, he's selling the program as passionately as one can sell a product and his high-energy level has left its mark on the players he inherited from O'Brien.

All that being said though, it's going to take time for Franklin to build Penn State into what he envisions it being. That's not to say the Nittany Lions will be atrocious in 2014, but roster depth is still an alarming concern given the sanctions levied against the program in 2012 and like his predecessor, Franklin has the challenge of motivating a team that still isn't allowed to compete for a Big Ten title or participate in any bowl games for the next two seasons.

Offensively, this will likely be a more run-oriented team in 2014 given the personnel. Penn State has the best young

quarterback in the entire Big Ten with sophomore Christian Hackenberg. As a true freshman last season, Hackenberg threw for nearly 3,000 yards and had a 2-to-1 touchdown-to-interception ratio.

Hackenberg will have two things aiding him in 2014 – a senior-laden backfield and one of the conference's top tight ends. The Nittany Lions boast a 1-2 punch of senior running backs Zach Zwinak and Bill Belton. This duo combined for 1,792 yards and 17 touchdowns on the ground last season. Penn State also brings back.

The tight end group is led by junior Jesse James, who is coming off a season where he caught 25 passes for 333 yards receiving and three touchdowns. In 2014, Penn State could be using as many as three tight ends at a time between him, junior Kyle Carter and sophomore Adam Brennemman. But assuming he's able to stay healthy, expect a spike in James' numbers this fall because of the inexperience in the Nittany Lions' receiving corps.

For the last two seasons, Penn State had the luxury of possessing one of the country's best wideouts in Allen Robinson. He alone accounted for nearly half of the Nittany Lions' production through the air last season and 69 receptions stood between him and the next-closest Penn State player in that category.

Sitting atop the preseason depth chart were a pair of juniors – DeShawn Baker and Matt Zanellato. Baker hasn't played a single snap in three seasons, while Zanellato only has six career receptions. After them are a bunch of underclassmen. This is a major question mark entering 2014 and one of the biggest reasons why Hackenberg's numbers this fall might not be similar to what he did last year.

Up front, Penn State only returns two starting offensive linemen and one of them is switching sides of the line. Senior

Miles Dieffenbach started every game at left guard last season and is now listed as the starting right guard. Junior Donovan Smith is the other returnee at left tackle. Beyond those two though again is a lot of uncertainty and it's not a real deep group either, so any injuries along the line could be crippling to this offense.

Defensively, the Nittany Lions will continue using a 4-3 look under Franklin. Senior defensive end C.J. Olanyian returns as the front four's leader following a junior campaign where he posted team-highs of five sacks and three forced fumbles to go with his 50 tackles. Junior Deion Barnes is also back at the other end spot. Inside, the name to potentially watch is junior Anthony Zettel, who moved to tackle from end during the spring.

The linebacking corps lost the team's leading tackler in Glenn Carson, but senior Mike Hull returns as the next big name from "Linebacker U." Hull was second on the Nittany Lions with 78 tackles in 2013 and will be joined alongside sophomore Nyeem Wartman, who had 32 tackles and four pass break ups last year.

The most experienced portion of Penn State's defense is the secondary, which features experienced players in all four spots. Junior Jordan Lucas returns at corner after starting all 12 games in 2013, a season where he was third on the team with 65 tackles, had a team-high 13 pass break ups and had three interceptions that was tied for a team-high with senior free safety Ryan Keiser. Penn State also returns senior Adrian Amos, who played at both safety and corner in 2013 and junior Trevor Williams, who started six games at corner.

On special teams, the story is senior kicker Sam Ficken and the possibility of him also handling punting duties in 2014 on top of all the placekicking duties. Ficken has never been the Nittany Lions' punter, but he has attempted 46 field goals during his career and only made 30 of them (exactly half of those came last season as he went 15-of-23).

In terms of the schedule, Penn State had two quirks. One is opening the season in Dublin, Ireland, against a UCF squad that beat the Nittany Lions at Beaver Stadium last season en route to winning the Fiesta Bowl. The other is opening Big Ten play two weeks before anyone else when it rekindles an old rivalry with Rutgers on Sept. 13. The other road game of note is Oct. 11 when it plays under the lights against Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Meanwhile, the home schedule is quite challenging as Northwestern, Ohio State, Maryland and Michigan State all visit Beaver Stadium this fall. In a season where Penn State wasn't dealing with NCAA sanctions, this would be seen as an enormous positive.

What will be interesting to watch with this team is how it progresses over the course of the year. At first glimpse, the Nittany Lions look like a 7-5 team again in 2014. But more so with them versus any other Big Ten team, injuries at key positions could absolutely derail this season. Brighter days may be ahead for Franklin and his program, but Penn State won't be there quite yet when this season kicks off.

AUDIO:

Penn State linebacker Mike Hull –

<http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Mike-Hull-2014-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>

2014	Iowa	position
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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 Vandenberg.

"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.

2014 Iowa position breakdowns: Running Backs

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](#), our second part examines the team's group of running backs.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

For years, the running back position at Iowa was harpooned with injuries, attrition and the like. But that wasn't the case in 2013.

The Hawkeyes had four running backs at their disposal last season – Mark Weisman, Damon Bullock, Jordan Canzeri and LeShun Daniels, Jr. All four of them made it through Iowa's 13-game slate without any significant injuries and combined for 455 total carries. All four of them are back in 2014.

Entering his senior season, Weisman is for intents and purposes the face of this group. The first time Iowa's offense takes to the gridiron, he's the first back getting carries. He led the Hawkeyes in rushing as a junior with 975 yards and eight touchdowns on the ground while compiling 227 carries (approximately half of the carries between the four backs).

The one concern with Weisman each of the past two seasons however has been durability, getting off to strong starts only to not hold up deep into November. Weisman said if he's able to help the team, he wants as many carries as he can get. But he's also open to the idea of the other three backs sharing the workload if it means he can be more durable late in the season.

"If someone else can be helping the team in a better way and keeping you more fresh and you're keeping them fresh, that's really what you want," Weisman said. "Any way to help the team possible, that's what us running backs, we really care about. We're a selfless group."

Bullock was second on the team in carries last season with 118 of them, but he has two things working against him in terms of duplicating that in 2014. One is that despite being used primarily as a running back in 2013, his past versatility having worked at receiver has led to questions about whether he should be out wide as opposed to in the backfield.

The other thing is the label of being the third-down back and only being used in passing situations either to catch short passes out of the backfield (or out wide like he did on his touchdown against Michigan State) or pick up blitzing defenders.

Bullock said he was accepting of that role late in the season last year, but wants to have a bigger role on first and second down if possible. Among the areas he has worked to improve on this offseason has been with vision – not just seeing the hole, but also with seeing passes when they do come his direction.

"This year, I just want to put it all together and just try to work on the little things," Bullock said.

There's also the strong likelihood that most of those carries Bullock had last season will go to Canzeri this season. It wasn't until November when Canzeri began being used more frequently by the Iowa coaches and he made the most of that opportunity. His most noteworthy performance during this stretch came in a 38-14 win over Purdue where Canzeri rushed for 165 yards and one touchdown on 20 carries.

The question regarding Canzeri is how much he'll actually be used because not only might he be taking some of Bullock's

carries in 2014, but also some of Weisman's carries.

"There's definitely a lot more that I think I can do and that I'll be ready to do," Canzeri said. "We'll really see once we can put the pads back on and everything."

Finally, there's Daniels, Jr., who possesses a similar build physically to Weisman and was among the few true freshmen Iowa had last season to see his redshirt burned. He appeared in seven games for the Hawkeyes in 2013 and while he didn't record any touchdowns, Daniels, Jr., did rush for 142 yards on 36 carries.

Iowa running backs coach Chris White made film cut-ups for all four backs of every carry they had in 2013 – good and bad. Daniels, Jr., may have had the shortest cut-up since he had the least carries, but he took plenty away from it including the importance of staying pad level.

"When I was watching through all my bad tape from last season, that was probably the most consistent thing that I saw," Daniels, Jr., said. "Even on my good runs, my pads were still high, so that was the main thing I took away from that."

How the carries ultimately get divided in 2014 remains to be seen, but the confidence Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz has in all four players remains on full display.

"I think the challenge right now is trying to utilize everybody's skills to the best way possible and also hopefully make it a combination that's going to be good for our entire team," Ferentz said. "It's nice to have some choices and options."

Iowa draws Texas in 2K Classic semifinal

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

For months now, the Iowa Hawkeyes knew they would be playing in the 2K Classic. On Tuesday, they found out who exactly they'll be facing when they arrive at Madison Square Garden.

The tourney revealed its bracket for the 2-day event in New York City and it shows Iowa playing Texas on Nov. 20. The Longhorns were a No. 7 seed in last year's NCAA Tournament and reached the Round of 32, where they lost to Michigan. This match-up between the Hawkeyes and Longhorns will happen at 6 p.m. Central that evening and be televised nationally on ESPN2.

Iowa's second game in the Big Apple then comes the following day, Nov. 21, where it will face either Syracuse or California. The Orange was a No. 3 seed in last year's NCAA Tournament and was upset by 11th-seeded Dayton in the Round of 32. Meanwhile, the Golden Bears reached the NIT quarterfinals last season and are now coached by Cuonzo Martin, who was previously at Tennessee and actually coached against Iowa last March in the opening round of the NCAA Tournament.

The Hawkeyes' second contest will either be at 4 p.m. Central on ESPNU or 6 p.m. Central on ESPN2, depending on the outcome of its game against Texas. Iowa also receives two home games that will be played prior to the Hawkeyes leaving for New York. No announcement has been made on who those games are against or regarding the rest of Iowa's non-conference schedule.