

4/10/2012: Kirk Ferentz/James Vandenberg teleconference transcript (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

Below are written transcripts of Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz and senior quarterback James Vandenberg from Tuesday's Big Ten spring football teleconference:

Ferentz's opening statement:

"It has been good to get started, certainly. Just to make a little bit of a correction, we don't technically stop this Saturday. It is our spring scrimmage and what have you, but we actually have three more workouts afterwards. We're just a little over halfway. We finished up our eighth practice on Saturday. The reason we're doing it this coming week, we have the Olympic Trials here in wrestling on the 21st and it's just going to be mayhem in the parking lot with, I think they're expecting around 16,000-17,000 people in watching the wrestling, so we decided to make this our final scrimmage for the public at least.

"Our team is working hard. We've got a relatively young football team and we have system changes, staff changes, reassignments, things like that. So we've got a lot of new elements to the program right now and I think that has made it that much more interesting to everybody. But you know, overall, we've got a pretty young team. Relatively inexperienced, but the guys are working hard. We're getting some good quality work in so far and attitude I think has been very, very good.

“Overall, I’m very pleased with things, but we still have a real long road ahead of us right now, so it’s good to be in the middle of things.”

On playing scrimmages against other teams during the spring:

“It’s certainly something to contemplate. I think we’d be open to it. It’s a little bit of a logistic issue, but I think it would be something that would garner interest certainly from a lot of people. Certainly our fan base I think would be excited about it. But that’s something, I’ve heard that proposal. I’ve also heard people talk about eliminating spring ball and having a six-week preseason, kind of like the NFL, and maybe integrate scrimmages in there, too. But we’ll see what happens.”

On the biggest qualities he looks for when recruiting offensive linemen:

“You know, the first two things that come to mind to me are guys that really have a lot of pride, take pride in their performance, and I think that’s true of any good player, not just offensive linemen, and then a real strong work ethic is certainly important. We’ve had our share of success. I guess Bryan Bulaga was probably the furthest along when he got here.

“He was really a unique story in that he started quite a few games as a true freshman here and was a first-round draft pick after playing three years of college football. In fact, he was starting for the Packers in their Super Bowl championship game in what would’ve been his fourth year in college. That’s really an exceptional story and really kind of went to the spectrum.

“But typically, you look at a guy like Robert Gallery that came here as a 235-245 pound tight end and really had to work hard to become a good lineman. Eric Steinbach was the same story. Then more recently, Riley Reiff came here as a defensive lineman and I think he weighed about 240 when he got

here, 245. He's getting a lot of attention right now, but maybe even more emphasis on Markus Zusevics and Adam Gettis. I expect both those guys will get drafted. I think they weighed 220 and 230 in high school. They're just guys that worked hard and after three years, they really gave themselves a chance to compete well in our conference.

"There's a lot of different roads to get there, but I think probably the biggest thing is you got to have requisite ability, certainly, and then the biggest thing is just a real strong work ethic and guys that take pride in their performance."

On whether the current NFL trend of moving away from a traditional running back will trickle into college:

"Well, there's no doubt that I think the pro game has changed a little bit in the last decade or so. Just look at last year some of the passing records that were set. There are some really good throwers out there. But yeah, I think there's still a place for obviously a good running back and if you've got one, that's a real luxury item. Tennessee comes to mind, the Tennessee Titans. But if you've got an exceptional back, I think most coaches, most offensive-minded coaches, are going to feature their players.

"If you've got a quarterback like [Tom] Brady or [Aaron] Rodgers or a Peyton Manning, certainly you're going to do what they do best. Those guys are exceptional. You don't get an opportunity to coach guys like that too often in your career and you're leaning towards their strengths. It just kind of depends on how your team's built. Baltimore still uses a running back pretty effectively and if you've got a guy that's a power runner, you're going to try to build your attack that way. If you have a guy that's versatile or can do things out of the backfield or from the wide position, I think you just kind of tailor, and that's what good coaching is. You tailor your system towards the players that you have.

“In college, if you can recruit towards a certain direction, obviously that’s a good thing. In our case, we’ve had all kinds of running backs here over the last decade. You know, we’ve had a big-power, strong runner in Shonn Greene who won the Doak Walker. We had a guy in Freddie Russell who was probably the smallest back that we’ve had who was productive in 2002 and 2003. So I think it depends on the players that you have and you try to accentuate those strengths.”

On whether more time has been spent this spring coaching coaches or players given the amount of change:

“You know, it was an unusual year for us. We’ve been so fortunate for 13 years to have the same coordinators. I can’t say enough about the job that both Norm Parker and Ken O’Keefe did. Just both them are exceptional people and exceptional coaches. They were here through the 1-10s and they’ve been here through the 11-1s, too. So they’ve been a huge part of any success that we’ve had.

“But that being said, I think the transition has really gone well on the defensive side of the ball moving Phil Parker up and then sliding guys around a little bit. They’ve really done a great job and for the most part, we’re doing things similar to what we’ve been doing, so that hasn’t been huge, but nonetheless, you don’t want to minimize any changes.

“And then on offense, just real so fortunate that we’ve been able to get Greg Davis here. Just heard nothing but great things about him through the research phase of things and then obviously very impressed with him during the interview. Having him here and on campus for a couple of months, I just couldn’t be more pleased. He has been a great fit, first and foremost, with our staff and with our players. After being around him now for two months, I can really understand why people that I respect so much have such great things to say about him.

“It has been good and the more dramatic change has been on the

offensive side, strictly with just the terminology and nomenclature. There has been a lot of learning. But the one thing, I went through this in the NFL, players tend to learn faster than the coaches in a lot of instances and that has certainly been the case here as well."

On how he thinks the Legends Division will shape out in 2012:

"I have no idea. Are we in the Legends? I guess we are. That's like so far out of my mind right now. I'm just really, like all of us, more worried about what's in front of us. We've got seven days left with our team here and we're just trying to maximize every bit. It's just such a critical time.

"I'll predict this – there will be a lot of good teams in our league next year, both the Legends and Leaders divisions. It has been extremely competitive the last 13 years. I expect it to be that way moving forward, too. With Nebraska coming into the conference, that makes the level of difficulty that much higher. I guess what's great about our conference each and every year, there are going to be some teams that are very good and other teams are going to rise up and really do a great job. To me, that's what makes it so exciting and great to be a part of."

Vandenberg's opening statement:

"Yeah. Spring ball has been going good. We're in our fourth week now. It seems like it has gone by faster this year than any year before. Learning a new offense I think has a lot of people excited on our team. We've had eight practices that have been good so far and we look forward to finishing off the spring right."

On what stood out about facing Michigan State's defense last year:

"I thought they were a very well-rounded defense, tackled very well. The thing that probably sticks out the most is they

covered us very well. Made it hard for us to take anything easy really and didn't let us get our run game going enough to where it was consistent enough to make them honor it. A very well-rounded defense, tackled very well and I just remember there was a lot of team speed out there. They rallied to the ball quick and covered our guys well."

On what the most apparent change will be in Iowa's offense from last year to this year:

"Well, I think obviously having a new play-caller, you're going to have some different tendencies, maybe what [Greg Davis] likes on third down compared to what Coach [Ken] O'Keefe liked, or first-down calls. But we know that we still want to be balanced running and throwing the ball. Our pass game has probably expanded a little bit and hopefully that will help us out on third-down situations."

On if the inconsistency on offense last season was puzzling and if there's a way to fix it:

"Yeah, I think that's something that we noticed as well going through the season. We knew we could play good football and we didn't do it consistently enough and I think that started with road games. That was something we struggled with and something that we really are working on this spring and this fall."

"We know that that's something that has to change because you can't be a good team in this conference without being able to win on the road, so that'll be the heavy focus. Playing on the road isn't that much different. You just got to concentrate a little more and that was something we weren't able to do very well last year."

On how he'd compare the speed of offense now from what it was last year:

"Yeah, I think that's something that Coach Davis definitely adds. I mean, he comes from a system that has kind of done it"

all and in recent years has really been an up-tempo, almost predominantly no-huddle offense, so that's something that we're experimenting with and something that we want to be able to do if need be.

"That's something that probably is one of the hardest things to learn right away running a new offense – going at that pace with all the new lingo. But it's something that we've been working on and something that we want to be able to do proficiently in the fall."

On the current receiving corps after losing Marvin McNutt from last season:

"Yeah, we have several guys returning that have some experience, starting with Keenan Davis. He's a really big target – actually, very similar to Marv – and obviously his role is going to expand a lot now that Marv's gone. Kevonte Martin-Manley is a young guy that did a really nice job for us. Got his feet wet for the first time and did pretty well, so a lot of things expected from him this year as well.

"To go with them, I think we have a very talented group of tight ends. We have some young guys, but we've got some guys that have been here for awhile with C.J. Fiedorowicz and Zach Derby and some young guys to go along in the mix. We've got a good plethora of people that can catch the ball and they've been doing very well this spring."

On if there's anyone fans should pay attention to during the open scrimmage on April 14:

"Well, I think just that tight end group as a whole has done really well for us this spring. They've come a long way, starting with the veterans, C.J. and Zach, who have played some valuable minutes for us. But some young guys like Ray Hamilton, Jake Duzey and Henry Kreiger-Coble, they've all been really catching the ball well and really expanding what we can do at the tight end position. So I think that's something that

has been really positive for us this spring."

On how the tight end position will now be used in the offense:

"Well, I don't think it's going to be that much different. It's just a personnel group of ours that we know we need to get the ball and they all do a good job of catching the ball. They're all big bodies that can get space. As long as they keep catching it, we're going to keep throwing it to them."

On facing players like cornerback Micah Hyde and free safety Tanner Miller in practice:

"Yeah, those guys are what makes practice enjoyable and difficult at the same time. Those guys are both experienced guys. I mean, Micah has been out there, it seems like forever now. Tanner as well. They've both done a really nice job. They make it very difficult, especially for young receivers. It's a great test to go against when they get in there with the 1s against Tanner and Micah. Just been doing a great job all spring making it hard on the offense and bringing some of those other DBs along as well."

2012 Spring Football position breakdowns: Special Teams (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

The play of Iowa's special teams in 2011 was a mixed bag. Some bits of it proved to be good. Other bits proved to be sloppy.

As the Hawkeyes continue their way through spring practices and prepare for the 2012 season, football's third phase is one that will continue to receive significant attention, even with coaching continuity remaining in place.

Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz said the unit would be aided some by linebackers coach LeVar Woods, who is expected to work with the punt return team and help defensive backs coach Darrell Wilson with field goal blocking. However, Wilson and running backs coach Lester Erb remain in charge of special teams. Wilson will continue to work with the kickoff team, while Erb stays focused on working with all the other aspects.

One change that isn't expected in terms of player personnel is on punt returns. Senior cornerback Micah Hyde, who only compiled 106 yards on 13 returns last season, remains the team's top punt returner. As for kickoff returns, the one player Iowa lost from last season is Jordan Bernstine. However, Bernstine had 30 of the Hawkeyes' 46 kickoff returns and compiled 713 return yards.

Senior wide receiver Keenan Davis is the most experienced kickoff return man Iowa currently has, but with him being the Hawkeyes' No. 1 receiver now, the chances of him being used on special teams dwindle. The most likely candidates to assume these duties are sophomore wideout Kevonte Martin-Manley and sophomore running back Damon Bullock. All four of Martin-Manley's returns in 2011 came in Iowa's 20-7 loss to Nebraska, while Bullock had two returns, one of which came in the Insight Bowl against Oklahoma.

Another player that would've been a likely kickoff returner in 2012 was sophomore running back Jordan Canzeri, but that's no longer an option for the Hawkeyes with Canzeri tearing his ACL back on March 28.

While the return game appears more set, the kicking game remains a question mark. Junior kicker Mike Meyer entered the

spring as the No. 1 kicker, but Ferentz acknowledged the competition between him, senior Trent Mossbrucker and redshirt freshman Marshall Koehn remained wide open.

Meyer handled all field goal and extra-point duties in 2011, as well as 66 of Iowa's 68 kickoffs. On PATs, he was a perfect 44-of-44. But Meyer was only 14-of-20 on field goal attempts, with the majority of those six misses coming in the latter half of the season. As for his 66 kickoffs, only four of them were downed for touchbacks, while three went out of bounds. That's not really a ratio any kicker should have, thus the reason for the position remaining open.

Mossbrucker has experience to his name, but Koehn is the player to watch here, especially when it comes to kickoff duties. Ferentz has said on multiple occasions how he's impressed by Koehn's power, which is what's keeping him in consideration right now.

Finally, there's the punt team, which loses punter Eric Guthrie from last season. Senior quarterback John Wienke, who ended up becoming Iowa's No. 2 punter behind Guthrie last year, is currently slated as the starting punter, as well as the team's holder on PAT and field goal attempts. At the moment, Wienke is competing at punter with sophomore Jonny Mullings.

But with that being said, this position will be more worth watching in the fall when incoming freshman Connor Kornbrath arrives on campus. If Kornbrath is as good as advertised, he might see the field right away, making this current battle between Wienke and Mullings moot.

The last thing worth noting here is that junior Casey Kreiter returns as the team's long snapper, a duty he began handling on a regular basis last season.

Special teams will be under more of a magnifying glass come August when everyone's on campus and the season draws closer.

But that doesn't take away from some of the intrigue that currently exists either.

2012 Spring Football position breakdowns: Secondary (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

If there's one group that may have to lead the Iowa defense not just this spring but in the fall as well, it's the Hawkeye secondary.

Iowa brings back two starters in the defensive backfield, as well as a third player who was used primarily as a nickel back in 2011 that should replace Shaun Prater at cornerback.

One returning starter that will be considered not only a leader in the secondary, but also along the entire defense, is senior cornerback Micah Hyde. The Fostoria, Ohio native began the season starting the first two games at free safety, but then moved back to his natural position of corner where he started the rest of the way.

In 13 games, Hyde recorded 72 tackles, had eight pass break-ups, and tied for a team-high three interceptions, two of which came in his first start last season at cornerback, a 31-27 win over Pittsburgh. Returning to cornerback turned out to be a wise move for Hyde. Now with him back for his senior season and working this spring at corner as opposed to free safety, this ought to pay dividends for the Hawkeyes down the

road as well.

The other returning starter from last season back in the secondary is junior free safety Tanner Miller, who began working with the first-team defense shortly after Hyde was moved back to corner. Like Hyde, Miller recorded three interceptions last fall, one of which was a 98-yard return for a touchdown that came in Iowa's 41-31 win over Northwestern. Now with most of a full season under his belt and two seasons of eligibility left, Miller is in position to become an ever bigger focal point in the secondary this year.

Coming in to replace Prater at the corner spot opposite Hyde is junior cornerback B.J. Lowery. Last season, Lowery missed the first five games due to a wrist injury suffered during fall camp. When he did see the field, he was used primarily as a nickel back. Lowery did record 11 tackles (10 of which were solo) and broke up three passes, one of which was the final play of Iowa's 24-16 win over Michigan on Nov. 5. Like Miller, an increase in game experience ought to help Lowery as he continues to develop.

The position of intrigue for new defensive backs coach Darrell Wilson this spring is strong safety. The player he and other coaches seem to be highest on is sophomore Nico Law, who came into the spring listed first-team and has worked this spring with the first-team defense. As a true freshman last season, Law appeared in all 13 games primarily playing special teams and recorded 11 tackles. With Law replacing Jordan Bernstine at strong safety, one would think Iowa won't miss a beat at the position.

Two other sophomores to keep an eye on as far as providing depth to the defensive backfield are Jordan Lomax and Johnny Lowdermilk. Lomax is currently listed behind Lowery at left cornerback and had seven tackles in 11 games last year. As for Lowdermilk, he had four tackles while also playing in 11 games. He entered this spring listed second at free safety

behind Miller.

Other guys who have playing experience and provide depth are senior cornerback Greg Castillo, senior safety Tom Donatell and senior safety Collin Sleeper. Castillo and Sleeper both started games against Tennessee Tech and Iowa State last season, while Donatell gained some playing experience moving to linebacker last year before returning back to safety, where Wilson now continues to coach him.

This is a group that has the playmakers needed to be a successful defense, so it shouldn't be a secret that the secondary will be counted on to contribute big for the Hawkeyes in 2012.

2012 Spring Football position breakdowns: Linebackers (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

In 2011, there was no group on the Iowa Hawkeyes decimated more by injuries than the linebacking corps. From fall camp on, injuries took a toll and hampered the team's depth at the position.

Now in 2012, the linebackers look to be a much healthier group. Assuming the injury bug doesn't hit them hard this upcoming season, this group has three juniors Iowa knows it can count on.

The anchors of this unit are James Morris and Christian Kirksey, who both recorded 110 tackles each to lead the Hawkeyes last season. Morris started the first five games at the MIKE position before an ankle injury prevented him from playing in Iowa's 41-31 win over Northwestern. He would remain at the MIKE against Indiana the following week, but then moved over to the WILL spot for the last six games, including the Insight Bowl.

As for Kirksey, he was the lone linebacker to start all 13 games in 2011, playing the first seven games at the WILL before moving over to the LE0 position once Morris returned from his injury and moved outside. While the spring 2-deep has Morris back at MIKE, Kirksey remains listed at LE0.

Filling the WILL position this spring is junior Anthony Hitchens, who appeared in eight games last season. Hitchens had 25 tackles and a fumble recovery while also dealing with a leg injury that prevented him from playing in the first five games of Big Ten play.

While the linebacking corps loses the leadership of two-year starter Tyler Nielsen, coming back to provide depth this spring is junior Shane DiBona, who missed the entire 2011 season after rupturing his Achilles' tendon during fall camp last August. Also on the recovery back from injury is junior Dakota Getz, who suffered a season-ending knee injury during the opening kickoff of Iowa's 44-41 loss to Iowa State on Sept. 10. DiBona is listed on the 2-deep behind Kirksey at LE0, while Getz wasn't listed.

Another guy who provides depth at the MIKE is sophomore Quniton Alston. While he didn't start any games as a true freshman, Alston did appear in six games while Morris and Nielsen both dealt with injuries. He collected seven tackles in those six games played. Two other names to keep an eye on this spring are sophomore Marcus Collins and redshirt freshman Cole Fisher.

Like many of the positions on this team, linebackers were also impacted by the coaching shuffle that took place this offseason. On board as the new linebackers coach is former Iowa linebacker and NFL special-teams standout LeVar Woods. Prior to being named to his new position last February, Woods had served as Iowa's administrative assistant and was the interim defensive line coach for the Insight Bowl after Rick Kaczinski left to join Nebraska's coaching staff.

Much like the addition of former center Brian Ferentz to the coaching staff, having a former player like Woods who has a strong passion for the game and teaching younger players is something that could lead to big dividends for the Hawkeyes down the road. Players along the defensive line last year thought he left an impression on them in their final week of bowl prep before playing Oklahoma.

What also helps make the transition here smooth is that Woods was a fill-in during the 2010 season when former defensive coordinator Norm Parker was hospitalized following a foot amputation. He knows the program and can relate to the players.

As long as this group can stay healthy in 2012, a nucleus composed of Morris, Kirksey and Hitchens should be strong enough to provide leadership to a defense that desperately needs it right now.

4/4/2012: Iowa spring football notebook

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz spoke briefly at the start of Wednesday's spring football press conference, confirming [reports from last week of sophomore running back Jordan Canzeri tearing his ACL](#).

In his first public comments about the injury since it happened, Ferentz said the 5-9, 180-pound back had surgery on the knee Wednesday afternoon. The actual tear took place during practice on March 28 while Canzeri was making a cut during a non-contact drill. An MRI performed the following day revealed the ligament damage.

Assuming rehabilitation goes according to plan, the earliest Canzeri would likely get medically cleared to practice again is in September. No timetable is actually in place though for when he could possibly return to the gridiron again.

"We won't go into it with a set plan," Ferentz said regarding Canzeri's rehabilitation process. "We'll just see how it goes and see how he's doing. What's most important is his welfare."

With Canzeri sidelined, the depth at running back now features sophomores Damon Bullock and De'Andre Johnson atop the 2-deep. Both were parts of Iowa's running back-by-committee implemented last December when the Hawkeyes lost to Oklahoma in the 2011 Insight Bowl. Ferentz said nothing from what has already been installed this spring by offensive coordinator Greg Davis would be altered as a result of not having Canzeri.

"We're going straight ahead," Ferentz said. "We're just a little thinner than we were last week."



Iowa wide receivers coach Erik Campbell discusses his group of wide receivers for spring football during a press conference with the local media held Wednesday, April 4, 2012 at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

Campbell assesses receiving corps

Iowa wide receivers coach Erik Campbell took to the podium Wednesday all smiles, and perhaps for good reason.

With offensive coordinator Greg Davis now in control of the Hawkeye offense, there's a sense that Iowa might throw the ball more often than before. And that's just fine with the former Michigan wideout, as long as his receivers know their blocking assignments in the run game as well.

"We just do our job," Campbell said. "Whenever it's called for us to do it, be ready. Those guys have really embraced that part of it."

It's no secret who Iowa's No. 1 and No. 2 receivers are this spring and – barring injuries – will most likely be this fall in senior Keenan Davis and sophomore Kevonte Martin-Manley. Campbell said Martin-Manley's progress this spring has made him take note following a redshirt freshman campaign where the 6-0 wideout caught 30 passes for 323 yards and three touchdowns.

“Now you can see that experience pay off,” Campbell said. “You can see him looking like a veteran receiver, doing things that a guy with that kind of experience has shown. He has done a good job so far this spring.”

While Davis and Martin-Manley are known entities in the Iowa offense, one thing Campbell is hoping will emerge this spring is a No. 3 receiver to complement the aforementioned duo, especially in packages where Martin-Manley would continue to be used in the slot.

Right now, Campbell said that No. 3 spot is up for grabs. He mentioned such names as senior Steven Staggs and juniors Don Shumpert and Jordan Cotton, but all three wideouts currently share a common bond.

“Not a lot of guys with game experience,” Campbell said. “That’s why I said it’s open for grabs right now.”



Iowa defensive line coach Reese Morgan discusses his group of defensive linemen for spring football during a press conference with the local media held Wednesday, April 4, 2012 at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

Making the switch from offense to defense

Reese Morgan could sense something was coming when he was asked by Ferentz to switch from coaching the offensive line to the defensive line last winter. As it turns out, the transition was easier for him to make than it was on his own family.

"I did upset my wife and our daughters because I had found out and I didn't tell them. They had to find out in the media," Morgan said. "Our two daughters ripped me for not telling my wife. My wife understands. We don't talk about that stuff.

"But I am in the doghouse."

As he continues earning back his family's good graces, Morgan finds himself enjoying the time he has spent working with what he acknowledged as "a young, inexperienced group." He also said that in a similar fashion to last season, there could be as many as 6-8 players used along the front four in 2012.

One name Morgan was quick to point out as emerging along the D-line as the unit's leader is senior defensive tackle Steve Bigach, who started five of the 12 games he appeared in last fall. Bigach compiled 24 tackles last year as a junior playing at both tackle and end while players such as Thomas Nardo and Dominic Alvis dealt with in-season injuries.

"Steve has been on the field and played," Morgan said. "He's respected by the players because of his knowledge and because he's such a hard worker. He cares about the other guys. He's trying to help them out a little bit."

Two redshirt freshmen he described as "raw" upon first mentions of them are defensive end Riley McMinn and defensive tackle Darian Cooper, both of whom have been listed as starters on Iowa's 2-deep this spring.

Morgan said Cooper reminded him of "a miniature Mike Daniels" (referring to the former defensive tackle) when he visited him on the recruiting trail. As for McMinn, Morgan described him

as explosive and coachable, adding that he wants McMinn to spend some more time this offseason with strength and conditioning coach Chris Doyle.

As he continues building up the defensive line, Morgan continues to stress things such as improvement, technique and fundamentals to his players.

“Our opponent right now is ourselves. Our challenge is how much we can improve,” Morgan said. “If our guys buy into that, we have a chance.”

TRANSCRIPT: [Ferentz/Campbell/Morgan transcript \(April 4, 2012\)](#) (Courtesy: UI Sports Info.)

4/4/2012: Iowa player audio with photos (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

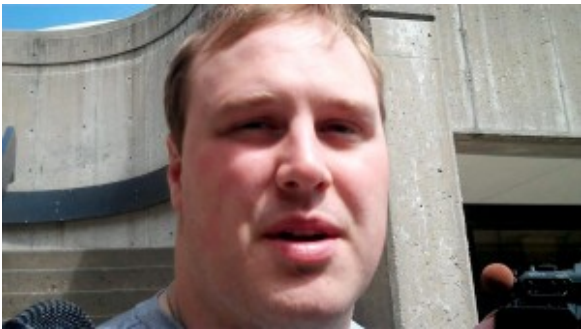
IOWA CITY, Iowa – On Wednesday, three members of the Iowa football team spoke to the local media to discuss how things have gone two weeks into spring practices.

Below is audio from the following players, all of whom are seniors – center James Ferentz, defensive tackle Steve Bigach and cornerback Greg Castillo:



James Ferentz, April 4, 2012

[James Ferentz, senior center](#)



Steve Bigach, April 4, 2012

[Steve Bigach, senior defensive tackle](#)



Greg Castillo, April 4, 2012

[Greg Castillo, senior cornerback](#)

2012 Spring Football position breakdowns: Defensive Line (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

Last season, one of the biggest challenges facing the Iowa Hawkeyes was shoring up a defensive line that had three players selected in the 2011 NFL Draft. While it wasn't the strongest group of players last fall, it had a pair of defensive linemen in tackle Mike Daniels and end Broderick Binns that were key leaders.

Daniels led the team with nine sacks and recorded 67 tackles in his second year as a starter. Meanwhile, Binns finished with 60 tackles last season and compiled five sacks, two fumble recoveries and nine pass deflections.

This spring, not only do the Hawkeyes have to find replacements for those two players, but for the entire defensive line with four seniors starting in the 2011 Insight Bowl against Oklahoma. Also gone are Thomas Nardo and Lebron Daniel, both of whom dealt with injuries in 2011 but managed to return to the gridiron in time for the bowl game.

And then there's the coaching change. With Rick Kaczinski moving on to become the defensive line coach at Nebraska, Iowa found itself moving offensive line coach Reese Morgan over to the other side of the trenches to coach the D-line in 2012. Morgan is being regarded as someone who isn't nearly as fiery and intense as Kaczinski but has enough influence on players to make them grow. Whether it happens with what is easily the most inexperienced group on the entire team remains to be seen, but this is worth keeping an eye on both this spring and

beyond.

The one defensive lineman who is both healthy this spring and has enough game experience under his belt to possibly emerge as a leader on this team is senior defensive lineman Steve Bigach. As a junior, Bigach played in 12 games and recorded 24 tackles. He got starts at both tackle and end in 2011 while Nardo and Daniel dealt with injuries and showed enough versatility that the coaches could move him to either position if needed. This spring, he has been working primarily as a tackle.

Iowa will be optimistic in hoping junior defensive end Dominic Alvis returns in time for the start of the season. Alvis is still sidelined with a knee injury that took place during the Hawkeyes' 24-16 win over then-No. 13 Michigan on Nov. 5 at Kinnick Stadium. Prior to the injury, Alvis recorded 30 tackles and 1.5 sacks.

With Alvis not in the picture right now, two names to watch at defensive end are Joe Gaglione and Riley McMinn. Gaglione is a senior who saw action in 10 games last season and recorded seven tackles. McMinn is a redshirt freshman that entered the spring at 6-7, 245 pounds.

In addition to Alvis being hurt, another injured D-lineman at the moment is sophomore defensive tackle Carl Davis. Prior to the start of last season, Davis was being touted as a guy who would clog up the middle of the field. Instead, he only had two tackles in six games and now has been rehabbing from a knee issue addressed in January. At 6-5, 310 pounds, Davis is easily the biggest D-lineman currently on the roster.

One defensive tackle who has shown progress this spring is redshirt freshman Darian Cooper, who came into the spring listed at 6-2, 280 pounds. Despite not being the biggest sized tackle, Cooper came in highly-touted and seems to have the attention of the coaching staff as he has worked with the

first-team defense throughout the spring thus far.

There are also a pair of incoming freshmen in Jaleel Johnson and Faith Ekakitie that, should neither redshirt, could potentially see the field right away for the Hawkeyes as true freshmen.

This group is easily the one that has the most uncertainty for now and what's on display right now probably will be completely different come fall camp. There's promise with some of the younger players, but that's where the difference will be made. If the growing pains that come with being an underclassman linger, then it could be a long season. If anyone shows flashes of brilliance right away in live game action, then Iowa might prove to be in better shape than expected along its front four.

2012 Spring Football position breakdowns: Offensive Line (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

The offensive line has always been a staple of Iowa football under Kirk Ferentz. This spring, it's an area being placed under an enormous microscope.

For one thing, former center Brian Ferentz has returned to the program to take over as the offensive line coach after Reese Morgan was moved over to coach the D-line. Regardless of how one feels about Kirk hiring his oldest son as an assistant,

Brian has the pedigree now after being the tight ends coach for the New England Patriots this past NFL season, one that saw New England come within two minutes of winning Super Bowl XLVI before ultimately losing to the New York Giants.

But it's not just the NFL background that might be of benefit with Brian. Don't underestimate the fact that he spent five years in the program as a player who was always remembered for both his physical and mental toughness. Bringing on an assistant in his late 20s/early 30s with the passion Brian has for Iowa is something that could really pay off for the Hawkeyes long-term.

As for the actual group of players he'll be coaching, there are a handful of questions that need to be addressed. Right now, the only certainty is senior center James Ferentz is in line to start for the third straight season.

The biggest of these questions is at left tackle after Riley Reiff declared for the NFL Draft. Seeing how Reiff has been widely projected as a first-round pick, this is something Kirk Ferentz probably envisioned unfolding after last season.

The most likely player to replace Reiff at left tackle is sophomore Brandon Scherff, who was primarily used at left guard last season, rotating with Matt Tobin. Assuming Scherff, who entered the spring listed at 6-5, 310 pounds handles the left tackle duties, that would enable Iowa to keep the senior Tobin at left guard.

Meanwhile, the right side of the line is where players will really need to emerge for the Hawkeyes as both guard Adam Gettis and tackle Markus Zusevics have moved on and are looking at potential NFL careers.

Junior Brett Van Sloten looks to be the odds-on favorite at right tackle after having been listed behind Zusevics at that spot for each of the past two seasons. Van Sloten entered this spring at 6-7, 292 pounds. One name to keep an eye on though

is junior Nolan MacMillan, who is currently second behind Van Sloten and has been practicing this spring. MacMillan missed all of last season due to a sports hernia injury. He had experience starting at guard in 2010.

Right guard, one name that could emerge is Austin Blythe, maybe not right away but down the road. Blythe redshirted last season and comes in at 6-3, 275 pounds. The player he's competing with at that spot is junior Conor Bofelli, who was listed behind James Ferentz at center for the bulk of 2011. Bofelli is listed at 6-5, 290 pounds.

The spring gives Brian Ferentz a good opportunity to see what combinations seem best suited once fall camp comes around in August. He made clear when he spoke last month that depth, versatility and competition will matter, especially with three linemen from last year's squad moving on.

Watching how the offensive line develops here between now and the first weekend of the 2012 season will say a lot as to how much better (or worse) the Hawkeyes end up being both as an offense and as a team.

2012 Spring Football position breakdowns: Tight Ends (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

The 2011 season marked the first time in years where Iowa lacked in overall productivity from the tight end position.

However, the emergence of C.J. Fiedorowicz from November on provides enough optimism for Hawkeye fans to think that 2012 will be more of what had become the norm under head coach Kirk Ferentz.

Fiedorowicz's maturation process really became evident during Iowa's 24-16 win over Michigan back on Nov. 5. He entered that contest with just three catches for 53 yards and had just moved past both tight ends Brad Herman and Zach Derby on the 2-deep. In that game, he only had one catch for nine yards, but that one reception set up a second-quarter touchdown that moved the Hawkeyes ahead 14-6 before ultimately winning.

From that game forward, Fiedorowicz became a primary target on third down for quarterback James Vandenberg. He finished the 2011 season with 16 catches for 167 yards receiving and scored three touchdowns, one of which came in Iowa's 31-14 loss to Oklahoma in the Insight Bowl.

Now with Fiedorowicz entering his junior season, he's in a position where as long as he continues to develop like he started to late last season, he'll be a key weapon in the Hawkeye offense this fall. How much the tight end is used under new offensive coordinator Greg Davis will remain to be seen, but seeing how Fiedorowicz is 6-7 and would create mismatches for any defensive back trying to cover him, one has to think Vandenberg will continue to go to him whenever he's open, especially given some of the inexperience behind Keenan Davis and Kevonte Martin-Manley at the receiver position.

Fiedorowicz isn't the only tight end that will be worth keeping an eye on in 2012, however. One name to watch this spring and as the Hawkeyes go through fall camp later this year is sophomore tight end Ray Hamilton. He only had one 15-yard reception last season, which came in Iowa's 34-7 win over Tennessee Tech, but Hamilton is listed at 6-5, 248 pounds this spring. In instances where Iowa does go to two tight end sets, which had been quite a bit under former offensive coordinator

Ken O'Keefe, Hamilton will likely be the one lined up opposite Fiedorowicz.

Iowa will also have senior tight end Zach Derby, who had the opportunity to showcase himself in key situations last season. Derby finished with 12 catches for 117 yards, but wasn't as involved late in the season as Fiedorowicz went on his late-season flurry. He probably won't have as big a role as either of the other two tight ends, but Derby does provide both depth and experience at the position should the Hawkeyes need him for whatever reason in 2012.

One last thing worth noting in this discussion is the latest coaching change to happen just this week, with graduate assistant David Raih taking over coaching duties with tight ends so former tight ends coach Eric Johnson can concentrate more on his duties as Iowa's recruiting coordinator. Raih is a former Iowa quarterback and an up-and-comer in the coaching ranks, so it will be interesting to see how the tight ends adapt to his style.

The question is simply how much more involved will tight ends be for Iowa in 2012. If the amount of involvement is what many suspect, then not only will there be improvement from this position, but it will also take loads of pressure off other positions in the offense trying to learn the new scheme.

2012 Spring Football position breakdowns: Wide Receivers

(premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

One of the few stable areas from the coaching changes made this offseason came with the receiving corps, as Erik Campbell will remain in charge of coaching that group.

A change in identity at wide receiver is imminent, however, especially with Marvin McNutt no longer in the picture. The question facing Iowa's receivers this spring isn't so much who replaces McNutt, but who can emerge to give the Hawkeyes depth that will desperately be needed.

With Keenan Davis returning after finishing second to McNutt in just about every receiving category, the onus will be on the senior wideout to lead this group in 2012. Davis finished with 50 catches and 713 yards receiving as a junior, catching four touchdown passes last season.

The other receiver Iowa will be counting on to make strides is sophomore Kevonte Martin-Manley. Primarily used as a slot receiver in 2011, Martin-Manley had 30 catches for 323 yards receiving and three touchdowns, two of which came in the fourth quarter of the Hawkeyes' 31-27 win over Pittsburgh on Sept. 17.

Outside of Davis and Martin-Manley however, there isn't much experience to work with this spring for Iowa. One player who will get the opportunity to impress this spring is senior Steven Staggs, who made five catches while playing 10 games in 2011. Another name to watch this spring and moving forward is junior Don Shumpert, who has primarily been used as a special teams guy for each of the past two seasons.

Redshirt freshman wide receiver Jacob Hillyer also saw his

name listed on the initial 2-deep released at the start of spring practice. Hillyer came into the spring listed at 6-4, 205 pounds. Should he continue to develop as he has, Hillyer and Martin-Manley will become two of the more reliable receivers Iowa has in the near future.

Nothing will be or should be flat-out determined with the Hawkeye receiving corps by the end of the spring outside of knowing Davis has to be the No. 1 guy being the the most experienced wideout Iowa has. Beyond that, this is really an opportunity for Campbell to coach up the others more than anything.

With Greg Davis at the helm as offensive coordinator, how Iowa uses its receivers in 2012 is going to be worth watching. The Hawkeyes weren't shy about using the spread when they deemed it necessary last season, and players such as Davis and Martin-Manley found themselves capitalizing during those times it was used. If Iowa opts for more of a spread attack this fall, there's no reason to think both players can't improve their numbers from a year ago. There would also be optimism for No. 3 and No. 4 receivers emerging.

Will Davis or Martin-Manley post numbers even remotely close to what McNutt compiled last year? Most likely not. But if Davis catches anywhere between 70-75 passes and Martin-Manley somewhere between 40-45 passes in 2012, that would be significant.

The best thing that Iowa can have happen is for any questions surrounding the receiving corps right now to be answered by spring's end. For one, it will give quarterback James Vandenberg a little more comfortability running the offense by the time fall camp starts. It also helps in terms of how Iowa uses other guys at the running back and tight end positions in the passing game.