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## USC ironman: Kyle Martin excels on offense and defense

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South Carolina's Kyle Martin [GERRY MELENDEZ](#) — [gmelendez@thestate.com](mailto:gmelendez@thestate.com)





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- MARTIN'S NUMBERS

*A closer look at USC junior first baseman Kyle Martin:*

**58:** Games started. He and Tanner English are the only two players to start every game.

**75:** Hits, the most on the USC team. That includes nine doubles and five home runs.

**22:** Multiple-hit games, the most on the team (15 with 2-hits, 3 with 3-hits and 4 with 4 hits).

**4:** Places in the batting order: 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th. He has batted cleanup in 39 games.

**2:** Errors (fewest of any regular) made in 542 chances for a .996 fielding percentage.

As the baseball left his bat during the third inning of South Carolina's SEC tournament game against Florida last week, Kyle Martin knew he put a good swing on a pitch from A.J. Puk.

But the USC junior first baseman had no idea how hard he hit the ball at cavernous Hoover Metropolitan Stadium, where the center-field fence stands 405 feet from home plate.

"It was a 2-0 fastball and I ended up getting a good piece of it. I hit it, and I just took off because no one hits it out of there (to center field)," Martin said. "I just kept running, and when I rounded first base, I heard everybody start cheering so I thought he caught it. When I picked my head up and the umpires were telling me it was a home run, I was shocked."

The Gamecocks got another reminder of how well Martin has played in his first season as a full-time starter. After serving as a role player his first two seasons, when he batted .291 in 158 at-bats, he has started all 58 games this season.

The Greenville native is hitting .329 to go with nine doubles, five homers and 33 RBIs. The 6-foot-1, 230-pound Martin, who leads the team with 22 multi-hit games, likes to flash his line-drive power to all fields.

"I just try to stay consistent, stay within myself and trust myself," he said. "I don't take many pitches. If you're going to throw it in there, I might as well hit it. I like to put the bat on the ball and make the other team get me out."

USC assistant coach Sammy Esposito called Martin's ability as a run producer a key component in the team's push to the NCAA regional, which starts Friday at Carolina Stadium.

"He's a legitimate middle-of-the-lineup hitter for us. His numbers match up with everybody's in the SEC," Esposito said.

Martin, who bats and throws left, showed flashes of that ability late last season, when he was named the MVP of the Columbia regional. He had worked his way into the starting lineup because of his defensive skills, which he gone on to display virtually every game this season.

A lifelong first baseman, he takes great pride in his footwork and ability to dig throws out of the dirt. He has made just errors on the season while saving his teammates plenty of them.

"I've made myself get out there every day in practice and work hard on the things that I needed to do to be as good as I could possibly be at it," Martin said.

Esposito, who was stunned Martin wasn't named to the All-SEC defensive team, calls him an elite defender.

"There's really none better at first base. He's saved us so many runs over there that you can put him up there defensively with (Seattle Mariners first baseman) Justin Smoak's ability around the bag," Esposito said. "Kyle has done a great job for us after losing LB (Dantzler). He's rolled right in there and hasn't looked back."

His teammates appreciate what he brings to the team. Shortstop Marcus Mooney believes the infielders can be more fearless in trying to make plays because of Martin.

"When the infielders make a bad throw, we realize there's still a pretty good chance that it's going to get caught over there. That makes us feel more confident," he said. "He's one of the best first basemen I've ever played with."

Martin realizes that his season is exactly what the coaches had hoped to see after strong fall practices cemented his place in the everyday lineup. His consistency is an extension of his personality.

"You never know if he's 4-for-4 or 0-for-4. You always want that even-keeled guy to stay in the middle and not get too high or get too low," Esposito said. "It's one at-bat at a time and one pitch at a time for him. He doesn't carry at-bats or any plays around the field with him. He moves on immediately."

His stellar play might lead him to move on if next week's MLB draft opens a new door. But he wants to keep playing as long as he can for the Gamecocks this season.

"No matter what happens (in the draft), I'm going to play as hard as I can here until the season is over," he said. "If my name's called early next week, I'd probably love to take that opportunity. It's always been a dream to play professional baseball."

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