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# Gamecocks quarterback Dylan Thompson 'knows it's his time'




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South Carolina senior quarterback Dylan Thompson. (Photo by Travis Bell/SIDELINE CAROLINA)

#### Season opener

Who: No. 9 USC vs. No. 21 Texas A&M

Where: Williams-Brice Stadium, Columbia

When: Thursday, 6 p.m.

TV: SEC Network

Line: USC by 10½

COLUMBIA - Naturally, the question was about Connor Shaw.

Dylan Thompson was in the final stages of preseason camp for a South Carolina team the senior quarterback has made his own, and yet the capital city was all atwitter over a performance by the former Gamecock in an NFL exhibition game. It was almost as if Shaw's Hail Mary pass for the Cleveland Browns had landed squarely on Columbia, reminding everyone of the sizeable shadow that continues to loom over USC's new starter behind center.

It was there that night on the practice field, when the microphones gathered and Thompson was asked about his predecessor. And it will certainly be there Thursday at 6 p.m.

when No. 9 South Carolina kicks off its season against No. 21 Texas A&M, and the senior from Boiling Springs tries to prove to the crowd at Williams-Brice Stadium something his teammates already believe - the mantle of Gamecocks leadership has shifted almost seamlessly to the player wearing No. 17.

"Since the day Connor left, he's been ready to step up and take control, and I think he's going to be ready to play come Thursday," said senior guard A.J. Cann, Thompson's roommate. "He's focused, he knows what's going to happen. He knows he's going to have control of this team, and I think he's ready to go."

Granted, Shaw is a difficult act to follow - the gutty battering ram was 27-5 as a starter and unbeaten at home, fueling an 18-game winning streak at Williams-Brice that will be on the line Thursday. Perhaps no single player had more of a hand in the consecutive 11-win seasons South Carolina has strung together the past three seasons. Thompson watched it all from the best seat in the house, playing his own crucial role at times, but never really challenging Shaw for the No. 1 spot. Last season at Missouri - when Thompson started, fell behind, and a banged-up Shaw engineered an impossible comeback - only cemented the hierarchy.

"You always want to play," said Thompson, at 6-3 and 218 pounds more of a classic passer than his predecessor, who often relied on his feet. "You don't get too much of a rush out of sitting and watching, although they were some great games. But it's past that now, I believe, and we're just ready for this year, and I don't have to worry about that anymore."

Indeed, not only is there no more Shaw, there's no clear backup, making Thompson the unquestioned leader of the Gamecocks' offense.

"Dylan know it's his game from start to finish," said quarterbacks coach G.A. Mangus.

Getting there, though, took a lot of patience. Head coach Steve Spurrier points out it was Thompson who keyed last year's road victory at Central Florida, it was Thompson who dominated Clemson in 2012, it was Thompson who threw TD passes against the likes of East Carolina and Arkansas the past few years. All of those appearances, though, came either in relief of Shaw or in spot starts because Shaw was injured.

"I think it's just part of the process," Thompson said. "When you come here, they don't guarantee you playing time. Unless you're (Jadeveon) Clowney, I guess - they probably

guaranteed him some.

"I just was behind a great player. Just studied my butt off and tried to do what coach asked me to do. Just stayed the course, and I think coach Spurrier and coach Mangus handled it great. Just waited my turn, and now we're excited to go play."

Playing behind Shaw, whose style naturally made him more susceptible to getting hurt, Thompson always had to be prepared. And for a backup, he took plenty of live snaps in key situations, which should pay dividends for the Gamecocks this season. "He carries himself the way you're supposed to," Mangus said. "We're fortunate to have him. The team is ready to play hard for him. He's the leader, and he's earned it, and I'm ready to watch him Thursday night."

His teammates have no doubt. "He's been ready," said junior receiver Shaq Roland. "He was ready since like two years ago. He's always ready. So he'll be fine."

For Thompson, the patience has been aided by perspective. In May, he graduated with a degree in sport and entertainment management. In July, he proposed to his girlfriend Melanie Helm. And over the past three years he's spoken at about 75 churches, evidence of a bedrock faith that's apparent in Thompson's posts on Twitter, as well as the rubber bracelets he wears on his wrists.

"That's what gives me hope and purpose, is that what I do performance-wise doesn't dictate anything for me," he said. "That's why I get excited to just have the privilege to play. To have the opportunity to have fun, and live my dream."

Thursday, he takes a large step toward realizing it. Around South Carolina, they'll never forget Connor Shaw, and the groundwork he laid to place the Gamecocks among the nation's elite. Beginning with Texas A&M, it becomes Thompson's turn to build upon that foundation.

"You can just tell," Mangus said, "that he knows it's his time."

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