

The Post and Courier

Sapakoff: Gamecocks tackle Brandon Shell is the anti-Clowney

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Posted: Wednesday, August 28, 2013 8:00 p.m.

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Shell

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Opinion



COLUMBIA — Brandon Shell has never won an ESPY Award. He doesn't have long hair sticking out the back of his South Carolina Gamecocks helmet.

If the Goose Creek High School graduate thinks opponents are "scared" of him, he hasn't told us publicly.

Jadeveon Clowney's loud pass rush will get ESPN spotlight treatment during tonight's North Carolina-South Carolina game. But keep an eye on the right side of the Gamecocks' offensive line, too.

Quietly, Shell might be the Gamecocks' most improved player. He's the right fit at right tackle, gradually becoming downright reliable.

What a difference a year between Thursday night openers makes.



Shell



Shell as a wide-eyed redshirt freshman got his first college start in the 2012 opener at Vanderbilt. He struggled and was benched before the Gamecocks rallied for a 17-13 victory.

Tonight, the Tar Heels face a different player.

South Carolina offensive tackle Brandon Shell (71) runs through a conditioning drill at Williams-Brice Stadium. (The State)

"I feel better confidence-wise," Shell said. "I have that year under my belt and I'm just ready to roll this year."

It's hard to go wrong with regular input from a pair of Palmetto State football giants.

Charleston native Art Shell, Brandon's great uncle, is a Pro Football Hall of Famer who played tackle and served two stints as an NFL head coach with the Raiders. He gave Brandon critiques throughout last season.

"He told me 'Don't stop on plays. Just keep playing,'" Shell said. "That's the main thing he told me, and that's probably the biggest problem I had last year."

And Clowney. The most hyped college football player in state history, is often opposite Shell in practice drills.

Vandy nightmare

"It's just going to make you better as a player," Shell said, "just to have a person on the team at that level."

Vanderbilt seems so long ago. What a nightmare for Shell, pulled from the left tackle spot and replaced in the starting lineup for the next game, a home victory over East Carolina. Shell resurfaced as the starter at right tackle in the fifth game of the season, at Kentucky.

He held the job the rest of the year.

Playing whole games against the likes of LSU, Florida, Clemson and Michigan makes a guy think he can block whatever North Carolina cooks up.

"He's a year older, that's the biggest difference," Gamecocks offensive line coach Shawn Elliott said. "Maturity, focus, reps. Things like that generate toughness and experience."

Off-season work centered on technique, footwork and speed.

"I'm just ready to play," Shell said.

More fruit, less snacks

This solid South Carolina offensive line, as much as anything else, represents the major Gamecock strides over the last four seasons. For years, the biggest rap on recruiting was the lack of size and skill up front.

Not now.

Left guard A.J. Cann (6-4, 314) is a team captain and All-SEC candidate. Right guard Ronald Patrick (6-2, 315) is one of only two seniors on offense (quarterback Connor Shaw is the other). Left tackle Corey Robinson (6-8, 341) is one of the largest living Americans. Shell is 6-6, 320. Redshirt freshman center Cody Waldrop (6-2, 319) is the only significant question mark.

Clowney yaps a lot in practice, and the offensive linemen talk back. But most of it is friendly improvement advice, Shell said. Otherwise, there is little shame in getting beat by the best

pass rusher in college football.

“You never look at it that way.” Shell said. “You know he’s a good player and he’s just making you better.”

Like Clowney, Shell has cut back on red meat. He has lost 10 pounds since last August.

“I eat more vegetables and fruits instead of snacking all the time,” Shell said. “It wasn’t that hard to do because I had my mindset that I wanted to do it.”

Food for thought: Considering the steady progress and royal bloodline, Brandon Shell might have an NFL career as long — if not quite as flashy — as Jadeveon Clowney’s.

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