

# Thompson steps into new role as USC leader

Willie T. Smith III, The Greenville News 7:42 p.m. EDT August 23, 2014



(Photo: Joshua S. Kelly, USA TODAY Sports)

COLUMBIA – If there is an athlete who loves being a member of the South Carolina football team more than Dylan Thompson, he has yet to be identified.

In his fifth season, the No. 9-ranked Gamecocks' quarterback is also prepared to take on the challenge of team leader.

"I want everyone to know I am putting in more time than any quarterback in the (Southeastern Conference) and in the country," Thompson said during spring practice. "I'm sure there are a lot of guys that work hard.

"I always remind myself that there are quarterbacks at a lot of schools that are working to be great. I try to ask myself each day, 'What have I done today to become great?'"

Thompson is following the footsteps of friend and former USC quarterback Connor Shaw in that aspect.

The former Boiling Springs High School standout appears to have a trait even Shaw didn't as his teammates flock to him and are eager to follow his lead.

"Dylan has been one of my best friends since I stepped on campus," said senior wide receiver Damiere Byrd. "He and Connor are great leaders, but they play different games.

"Dylan isn't as much of a runner as Connor, but we have to stay on our toes because he can check into different plays and call out different things all the time."

Thompson is grounded and ready to give his best shot during the 2014 season, which opens Thursday at Williams-Brice Stadium against Texas A&M.

Spurrier has already said Thompson has the ability to compete in the NFL. Nothing could be further from the 6-foot-3, 218-pounder's mind, however.

All he wants is to help the Gamecocks achieve even higher feats than the past three seasons when they have finished with 11-2 records and in the Top 10.

"I think he can help lead this team," said senior offensive guard A. J. Cann, Thompson's roommate and close friend. "I think he's capable. He was blessed with the ability to lead and he does a great job in that role.

"I think he has been waiting patiently. He's ready to step in and make some big plays for us."

Thompson has had his moments at USC, the biggest being the 2012 game against Clemson when he led the Gamecocks to a 27-17 win at Death Valley.

There have been others, although when healthy, Shaw was always the No. 1 quarterback.

Despite that, Thompson never considered looking for a school that could deliver more playing time.

He's a Gamecock through and through. He even recently proposed to his girlfriend, Melanie Helm, at the 50-yard line in Williams-Brice Stadium.

"I think it is just part of the process," Thompson said with a laugh. "When you come here, they don't guarantee you playing time, unless you're (Jadeveon) Clowney, I guess.

"I was behind a great player. I just studied my butt off and tried to do what the coaches asked me to do and stayed the course. I think Coach (Steve) Spurrier and (quarterbacks) coach (G.A.) Mangus handled it great. I just waited my turn and now I'm excited to go play."

ESPN college football analyst Jesse Palmer acknowledged Thompson has different skills than Shaw, but he believes Thompson also can successfully lead the offense.

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"He's not the same runner as Connor Shaw, although he can run," Palmer said. "He can keep plays alive and extend plays, but I think he is a guy who wants to stay in the pocket more."

"He is a little bit bigger than Connor Shaw. I think he's 6-3 and can see the field a little bit better, which is why I think he kind of feels more comfortable staying inside the pocket, trying to make throws and deliver down the field."

Thompson has worked with Mangus to improve his completion percentage, which stands at 55 percent.

"Something he really worked on hard during the spring was getting to his check down," said Mangus. "If that running back is wide open, get it to him. You starting doing that and you'll be amazed at how fast that (percentage) can get into the 60s."

Whatever happens, Thompson has enjoyed the journey. That includes learning at the feet of Spurrier, who is known to be tough on quarterbacks.

They have built a special relationship.

"He is a fun coach," Thompson said of Spurrier. "I think that is something that is really underrated about him. He has a blast doing what he does in the meeting room and out here."

Thompson concedes that being the No. 1 guy beats cheerleading from the sideline.

"You always want to play," he said. "You don't get too much of a rush sitting and watching. It is past that now. We're just ready for this year, and I don't have to worry about that now."

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