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Heard earns his way

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Not much has been given to Carlton Heard in his football career. But the redshirt junior receiver from Athens, Georgia, has repeatedly shown he can earn his keep.

The latest example came midway through preseason practice, when Heard was awarded a scholarship more than a year and a half after he first walked on to South Carolina's football team.

"All the hard work paid off," Heard said after practice Monday. "All the running, all that stuff when I wasn't on scholarship. It was just great. It was a great feeling seeing all that hard work you put in really pay off."

Heard caught 25 passes for 520 yards and seven touchdowns as a senior at Clarke Central High School, helping the Gladiators go 11-1 and win the Georgia region 8-AAAA title.

But that wasn't enough for any major programs to come calling, so Heard walked on to the football team at Gardner-Webb University, a small liberal arts school in Boiling Springs, North Carolina.

Heard impressed the staff at Gardner-Webb enough to earn a scholarship even before preseason practice ended, but he redshirted his true freshman year anyway.

He played in eight games for the Runnin' Bulldogs the next season, catching 31 passes for 422 yards and a touchdown. But when his head coach at Gardner-Webb, Ron Dickerson Jr., resigned after the 2012 season, Heard decided it was time to move on as well.

"I just felt like I wanted to play on a bigger division," Heard said. "I just had the feeling that I should transfer. Gardner Webb is a great school, but I just felt like I wanted to play in a bigger division."

Heard applied to Auburn, South Carolina and UNC Charlotte, which was just starting its football team.

In January of 2013, he seemed bound for Charlotte. But a day before his departure to join the 49ers, Heard got a call from USC's admissions office. He answered the phone and learned he'd been accepted.

Still wanting to test himself on a bigger stage, Heard changed his mind, enrolling at USC in January and walking on to the football team that spring.

"God had a plan for me," Heard said. "So I went to Gardner-Webb, and then I transferred here. Here I am now."

NCAA transfer rules rendered Heard ineligible last fall, but he got to work impressing the coaching staff anyway.

A video posted to Instagram by USC strength and conditioning coach Joe Connolly last spring shows Heard leaping onto a high platform after only a short running start.

Heard stood out on the field as well last spring, earning "Most Improved" wide receiver honors. He was one of just three players to catch more than one pass at the Garnet and Black Spring Game, hauling in two for 15 yards.

"I was just trying to do all I can to get put on scholarship," said Heard, adding that he wanted badly to relieve his family of the burden of paying for college.

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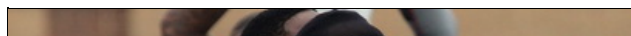
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When preseason practice rolled around, Heard had climbed off the



Paul Collins

Heard is listed as the backup to Nick Jones at one of USC's three receiver positions.

Spurrier took notice on a play where Heard went up and over a defender to reel in a jump ball.

"He was just like, 'You know what you get for that catch?'" Heard recalled. "He said, 'You get put on scholarship.'"

Heard said he was overwhelmed with joy as his teammates applauded after Spurrier's announcement. He still struggles to express just how much it means to him.

"Being a walk-on, of course, you know you've got to work hard," Heard said. "You've got to work a little bit harder than the guys who are on scholarship because you've got to stand out. It was my goal just to be on top in the weight room. I just went goal by goal, trying to accomplish those. At the end of the day, it all came together."

Heard said he knows his journey is nowhere near finished, even if he does feel good with where's he at right now.

"I've still got a lot to learn, still got a lot to improve on," Heard said. "But I'm trying to learn. I'm trying to get there. I'm trying to just do my best."

Heard has made a habit of setting his goals high and then achieving them. Next up? Finding a way to contribute in the Gamecocks' season opener Thursday night against Texas A&M.

"It's kind of a test of if I can play at a bigger level, if I can do my assignment," Heard said. "That's what I'm focusing on now, my assignments and just doing whatever I can to help the team."

Heard said his mentality moving forward, even with the scholarship, will be much of the same.

"I'm a humble guy," he said. "I don't like to be all flashy and stuff like that. I'm just playing as if I wasn't even put on scholarship."

around, heard had climbed on the scout team and into the second string in the depth chart, where he could vie for real playing time behind established wideouts Nick Jones, Damiere Byrd, Pharoh Cooper and Shaq Roland.

That's what Heard did this preseason, making several circus catches and showing off an explosiveness that's rare among walk-ons.

His athleticism caught USC head coach Steve Spurrier's eye in a fateful film room meeting on Aug. 15. As the team watched film of 7-on-7 drills,

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