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Paulk brothers united in helping each other

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Running back Darius Paulk at South Carolina's practice Saturday, Aug. 2, 2014.
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- PAULK BROTHERS

A look at the three Paulk brothers who played at Richland Northeast High:

RODNEY

Nickname: “Busta”

College: USC

Now: Game warden

LEONARD JR.

Nickname: “Scoota”

College: East Carolina

Now: Teacher and coach in N.C.

DARIUS

Nickname: “Bear”

College: USC

Today: On scout team, sitting out year after transferring

As he knew it would, Leonard Paulk’s phone beeped. Darius again.

“I talk to him a good bit,” the middle of the three Paulks said. “I tell him to stay focused, give the defense a good look. He’s on the scout team and trying to be the other team’s offense, so I tell him to challenge them as a running back.”

Darius Paulk, the youngest, is ineligible this year after transferring from North Greenville. He walked on at South

Carolina and won't dress this year, but he's doing his part to prepare the Gamecocks for each game.

This week, it's a little more personal. This week, East Carolina – where Leonard played – comes to Williams-Brice Stadium, where oldest brother Rodney Paulk played on many Saturdays from 2006-11.

Any smack being lobbed over the phone lines? Nah.

“East Carolina's in my heart, but blood is thicker than water,” said Leonard, a North Carolina elementary school P.E. teacher who also coaches high school football. “He calls me a lot to ask about the redshirt, the scout-team process. I tell him to go out and work hard, because if he doesn't do his job, the team won't get fully prepared.”

Saturday will trigger a lot of memories for Leonard Paulk Sr. An Army veteran who moved to Fort Jackson in 2002, his three sons were meant to play football. A former high school strong safety in Miami, Leonard Sr. didn't have the test scores to play in college but made sure his three boys were going to have the opportunity.

“I kind of got them into it when I was stationed in North Carolina,” Leonard Sr. said. “They progressed throughout the years. Darius saw his brothers out there playing and wanted to play, too, and it came natural to him.”

Each of the three went on to strong careers at Richland Northeast High, with the nicknames their father tagged them with sticking. Rodney, the enforcer, was “Busta.” Leonard Jr., who never wanted to walk as a child, was “Scoota.” Darius, the burly one, was “Bear.”

Even though Bear can't play this weekend, Busta and Scoota are telling him how to approach it when his day comes. Like Rodney was with Leonard Jr., he's always available with advice.

“Trash-talking? None of that,” Rodney said. “At the end of the day, we're all family.

“Like last night, it was me, Mom, Dad, Darius and my wife, sitting there over dinner, talking football and whatever else.”

Rodney was a freshman All-SEC linebacker for the Gamecocks in 2006 who seemed poised for stardom until knee injuries wrecked his 2008 and 2009 seasons. He returned in 2010 and 2011, playing integral parts in USC's only SEC East championship and its first 11-win season.

A marine biology graduate, Rodney turned his love of animals into a career. He's a game warden who patrols Orangeburg, Bamberg and Calhoun counties.

He remembers the 2011 USC-ECU game in Charlotte, where he was on the opposite sideline of Leonard Jr., who started his first career game. Mom and Dad were in the stands, each wearing custom-made jerseys with Rodney and Leonard's numbers on them.

The game started miserably for the Gamecocks, USC trailing 17-0 before Stephen Garcia entered and saved the day. While told he was going to play the second quarter anyway, Garcia's chances weren't hurt by Connor Shaw being knocked to the turf in the first – a hit delivered by Leonard Jr.

“I was kind of nervous,” Leonard Jr. said. “Rodney just said to stay focused, go out there and play football.”

The teaching has passed from brother to brother, Rodney coaching Leonard Jr. and Darius, Leonard Jr. instructing Darius about how to handle being on the bench. A standout for the Crusaders in 2012, a coaching change had Darius feeling uncomfortable in 2013. He decided to head back home.

“I didn't want to be miserable,” Darius said during the spring. “I had to make a decision on where I was going to be happy, and I was always going to be happy at home.”

“I told him that he has to enjoy his life,” Leonard Sr. said. “He came to South Carolina and did pretty good, got his name on the board for weightlifting, power clean and squats.”

Darius, who reflects his new school with garnet tips on his hair, is hoping all of his work pays off beginning in 2015, be it with a scholarship or playing time. “He just wants to help the defense out the best he can,” Leonard Sr. said. “He’s the opposition’s running back, so he’s out there to give them a good look. I always told him that even though he was the smallest, he had to just be himself.”

Leonard Jr. doesn’t know if he’ll make it on Saturday, as he has a game to coach on Friday night. Rodney can’t make it either, as he has to work after taking two weeks off to get married and have a honeymoon. Leonard Sr. and Mom will be there, though, even though they know Darius isn’t playing.

“I’m going for the Gamecocks,” Rodney said. “Little rough this past Thursday, but I feel that we’ll be fine. Talking with Darius, we’re all in support of our brother. May the best team win.”

“Leonard pulls for ECU, but since his brother is on the team, he’s pulling for his brother,” Leonard Sr. said. “Blood’s thicker than water.”

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