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## Position change, progress have David Johnson in line to contribute

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Defensive end David Johnson

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When David Johnson matched up with Na'Ty Rodgers in the Oklahoma drill last week in practice, the goal was simple.

The South Carolina defensive end needed to push back and “beat” his fellow redshirt freshman offensive lineman. Getting to the passing-by tailback would be a bonus.

Johnson knocked back Rodgers, then peeled off and tackled Darius Paulk. Celebration followed from his defensive teammates.

“Small victories turn to big victories,” Johnson said. “You win a bunch of small battles, you can win the big battle.”

Johnson, from Lithonia High in Lithonia, Ga., hopes that a solid spring and summer keep him in the mix for his first taste of playing time in 2014.

He was part of the 2013 linebacker class that included Larenz Bryant, Skai Moore and Jonathan Walton. All four set sights on playing right away with the position in flux.

Johnson, however, arrived at USC on the heavy side – “overweight,” he said. Listed at 6-foot-1 and 268 pounds in 2013, he was anywhere from 30 to 60 pounds heavier than the other linebacker signees.

While Moore, Bryant and Walton all saw the field as true freshmen, Johnson found a home as a defensive end on the scout team.

“You have to face the facts. Either you’re ready or you’re not. I wasn’t ready,” Johnson said. “I did the redshirt workouts and got better over the offseason, and I’m about to be ready to play this year.”

Defensive line coach Deke Adams is counting on Johnson to contribute this season.

“He’s got a great motor,” Adams said. “He really plays hard. He works his behind off. He’s been focusing on doing everything the right way and not taking shortcuts. That’s been good because he’s been improving.”

Johnson is listed on the depth chart behind Darius English at one of the end spots and continues to work with the second team this preseason. He said he is getting about the same amount of reps whether the Gamecocks are in the 4-3 or 3-4 alignment.

Is he working at the Big Ol’ Backer spot in the 3-4 scheme? Nope. He’s too heavy, he said.

He was listed at 275 pounds on the preseason roster. He believes he’s closer to 265 or 270 now, with a long-term goal to get to 255 or 260 pounds.

Johnson and fellow Lithonia graduate Cedrick Cooper are helping each other at defensive end during camp. Both came to USC as linebackers.

Johnson also credits Gerald Dixon and J.T. Surratt as being mentors during his early time on the line.

“They’re all big brothers to me,” he said. “They’ve been looking out for me since I got here, trying to make sure I get the playbook down.”

Johnson as a senior at Lithonia had 109 total tackles, 11 sacks, 20 tackles for loss, three forced fumbles an interception and a fumble recovery. He recorded a sack in South Carolina’s spring game in April.

He doesn’t have any individual goals for 2014 beyond staying in the rotation. Adams believes Johnson will do just that.

“I’m happy where he’s at,” Adams said. “There’s no doubt in my mind he’ll be a big help for us this year.”

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