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October 20, 2014

Marine veteran makes a difference

Avery Wilks
GamecockCentral.com Staff Writer

Walk-on defensive end and Marine veteran Michael Washington was a longshot to ever suit up for South Carolina's football team.

But a string of injuries and lack of productivity at the position made it possible with a Football Championship Subdivision opponent coming to town.

USC head coach Steve Spurrier told reporters earlier last week that Washington, who is 27 years old, could play on Saturday against Furman.

And on Friday, before the Gamecocks traveled to their team hotel, coaches confirmed to Washington that he would play the next day.

They also told him he would start.

"It was kind of surprising," said Washington of the revelation. "I mean, like nerve-racking because I didn't want to get out there and mess up."

He didn't.

Washington logged three tackles against the Paladins, but his biggest contribution came on a first-quarter fumble recovery.

The Paladins were down 14-7, but were threatening to even the score from the USC 11-yard line. That's when USC defensive tackle Phillip Dukes stripped the ball from Furman tailback Hank McCloud.

"Next thing I know, it was on the ground, so I just jumped on it," said Washington. "It was amazing."

Washington covered the ball with his 6-foot-3, 237-pound frame, securing USC's first forced red zone turnover of the season.



Walk-on defensive end and former Marine veteran Michael Washington celebrates after recovering a fumble in the first quarter on Saturday.

"Coming out, I was more of a 'me' player," Washington said. "Coming out of high school, I was kind of all about me. And of course in the military, you learn a lot of teamwork."

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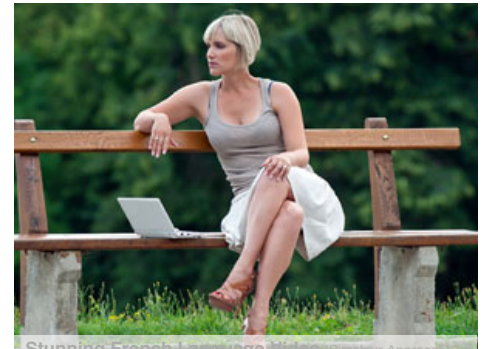
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CJ Driggers

The experience, Washington said, taught him how to work with others.

After four years with the military, the Allendale, South Carolina, native enrolled at USC Aiken in the spring

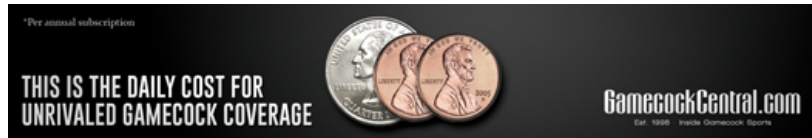
After four years with the military, the Allendale, South Carolina, native enrolled at USC-Aiken in the spring of 2011. He thought of transferring to USC that fall, but instead attended South Carolina State, walking on with the Bulldogs' football team to play with his cousin.

Washington didn't appear in any games for S.C. State that fall, and he transferred to USC the following spring, walking onto the team as a defensive end. He practiced on the scout team last season, and USC's coaching staff voted the oldest player on the squad the "outstanding walk-on" of this spring.

Washington said he missed an assignment or two in his first career game on Saturday, but that "other than that, I think I did pretty good."

His coach, defensive coordinator Lorenzo Ward, said Washington played well at times, but that he also made some small mistakes.

"For him playing his first football game, I think he played OK," Ward said.



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