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Gamecocks sophomore Jamari Smith trying to learn how to play cornerback, seize opportunity

Ryan Wood

[Email](#)

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COLUMBIA - Standing underneath Williams-Brice Stadium, Jamari Smith looked the part Tuesday afternoon.

The sophomore is strong and wiry, 5-foot-10 and 200 pounds. He wore a familiar number across his chest: 27. Those digits once draped former South Carolina cornerback Victor Hampton.

Smith is hoping to fill the void left by Hampton or former South Carolina senior cornerback Jimmy Legree this offseason. Coaches think he has a chance. It's why Smith was moved from running back to the secondary after the first week of fall drills last August, and why he's still playing defense this spring.

Now, with South Carolina's cornerback position depleted because of expired eligibility and transfers, Smith can prove he has a significant future in this program.

"A lot of reps," Smith said. "So I've got to keep it mental, and I have to stay focused."

Smith knows he needs to make the most out of these reps if he has any chance. Reinforcements are coming soon. This summer, five freshmen cornerbacks will join the Gamecocks. Suddenly, opportunity won't be so easy to find. Practices will be busy. The depth chart will be full.

If things go according to Smith's plan, this spring will give him a head start. He's learning how to play in South Carolina's defense, acquiring the basic instincts needed to cover SEC receivers. Smith, who played less than 20 snaps last season, said he's comfortable jamming receivers at the line of scrimmage.

With his next breath, he admitted there's much more he needs to know about pass coverage.

"He has good burst, good quickness, good change of direction," secondary coach Grady Brown said. "He's a strong guy, and he's quick with good speed. So pretty much all of the physical attributes that it takes to be good at that position, he has them. He just has to learn how to play."

Smith isn't the only scholarship cornerback competing for a spot this spring. In fact, South Carolina has two others - and only two.

Rico McWilliams and Sidney Rhodes will also get plenty of reps. The Gamecocks also have Ali Groves on roster, but shoulder surgery to repair a torn labrum will force him out of spring drills.

Right now, there's no way to tell who will top South Carolina's cornerback depth chart as spring turns to summer. Brown hopes at least one candidate impresses enough to be in the mix come the fall.

"It's possible," Brown said. ". Those guys are here on campus, and they all need to take advantage of this opportunity to get better and to get reps. So I would hope so, but I can't really tell right now."

Smith expects to be in the mix.

With only inexperience at the position, Smith doesn't have a veteran to show him the ropes. Instead, he said he watches tape of Hampton and Legree, trying to emulate what they did to become successful.

He spoke in reverence of the departed starters from last year. About that No. 27 on his chest? It's a reminder of the void South Carolina must fill, but not necessarily a target for Smith's goals. Smith said he wants to change numbers, but decided to keep it for the spring.

"Yes, big shoes," he said. "A lot of big shoes to fill."