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September 30, 2014

Roberts rises rapidly to the top

Scott Hood
GamecockCentral.com Analyst

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Shoulder and knee injuries kept Marcquis Roberts off the football field throughout his first two years (2011-12) with the South Carolina program.

Now he is making up for lost time.

A season after dividing time with Skai Moore at outside linebacker and finishing with 48 tackles, Roberts has grabbed the starting middle linebacker job from Kaiwan Lewis and T.J. Holloman after beginning the season third on the depth chart and, according to Steve Spurrier, has brought 'effort and enthusiasm' to the Gamecock defense.

Roberts had five tackles, one tackle for loss, in last Saturday night's one-point loss to Missouri and should make his second consecutive start at Mike when USC visits Kentucky this weekend.

Linebackers coach Kirk Botkins said the process leading to Roberts' ascension to the top of the depth chart began on the practice field and migrated to Saturdays.

"He's practiced better and been a little more consistent than the other guys," Botkin said Tuesday after USC's practice at the Proving Ground. "He gives us a little confidence and an edge we've been missing. It's the same thing week in and week out. Whoever makes the most plays, whoever practices best and shows improvement is going to play and we're going to reward them for that.

"We're trying to put the best ones out there and right now he (Roberts) is one of the better ones right now. T.J. is still doing a good job. Kaiwan is a little banged up right now. We've got quality depth there. They're still pushing for the starting job."

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Roberts, a lifelong Atlanta Hawks fan who wears No. 21 in honor of Hall of Famer Dominique Wilkins, was moved to Mike last spring because of his rare combination of speed and strength.

"He's a good physical player and he's a good blitzter," Botkin said. "He's still learning to call the defenses

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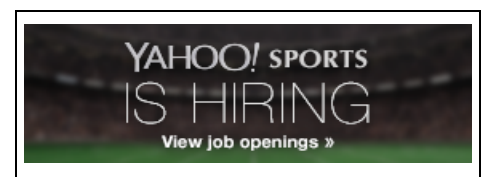
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and set the fronts, but he's doing a good job with that. He brings a physicalness. He's a competitor and loves the game. He wants to be good and wants to do good. We've always liked him at linebacker. We're just fitting him in where he needs to be. He's doing some good things right now."

The Mike linebacker, of course, is the vocal leader of the Gamecock defense and is responsible for making sure the defensive front seven are positioned correctly when the ball is snapped. Roberts had a learning curve for that aspect of the job, but has improved significantly over the past few months.

"He did a good job setting the front and doing everything we asked him to do and being the quarterback on defense," Botkin said.

Persevering through the adversity in his first two seasons at USC made Roberts a better player, Botkin said.

"He's fought through some injuries and tough times," Botkin said. "Those kind of things usually just make you stronger. That's what has helped him. He's a guy that wants to do well. He didn't play early this year, either, so sitting through that was hard, but he kept fighting and kept competing."

"We're going to reward the guys that come out here and work their butts off every day and make plays on the field. We want tough, hard-nosed guys playing football and he's one of them right now. Those are the guys that will be playing."

Roberts said missing two years of football in 2011-12 because of the injuries was "rough at the beginning," but he braved the mentally challenging times with the help of his family and teammates.

"I just stayed positive through the whole situation knowing I still had a chance to come back and play," Roberts said Tuesday. "I wouldn't say I was worried (I wouldn't play again), but it was hard to go through two years in a row."

Roberts, who underwent surgery for a torn labrum in the summer of 2011 before tearing his ACL early in spring practice in 2012, credits hard work on a daily basis in practice for his rise to the top spot at Mike linebacker.

"Every day in practice, I come out with the positive energy," Roberts said. "I try to bring that to my teammates and I think that is reflected (in how I practice). The coaches have seen it. I just got my chance."

NOTES:

-- Quarterback Dylan Thompson, wide receiver Pharoah Cooper and center Cody Waldrop all returned to practice on Tuesday after sitting out Monday's workout with a variety of ailments. Thompson's participation should ease concerns about the redshirt senior's status for Saturday night's game.

-- Defensive end Gerald Dixon was held out of Tuesday's practice as a precaution with a tender knee. Dixon could practice on Wednesday. Defensive line coach Deke Adams said Deon Green will get some reps at defensive end this week as an emergency option in case Dixon is limited on Saturday at Kentucky.

-- Botkin on the defensive game plan for Missouri: "I thought Coach Ward did a great job with the game plan mixing in some different stuff and different pressures. They executed what we asked them to do. But now we have to put it together for four quarters, obviously. Missouri is a good football team. They've got some high-powered guys. We knew they could score and score fast. We wanted to keep pressuring them. I don't know what happened. We've got to start faster and finish stronger."

-- Botkin said freshman Bryson Allen-Williams and sophomore Larenz Bryant are sharing snaps at BOB linebacker. "Sometimes I forget he (BAW) is a true freshman," Botkin said. "He is pretty sharp and does some things a true freshman doesn't usually do. He still does some bonehead stuff, but he's a hard worker and wants to be good."

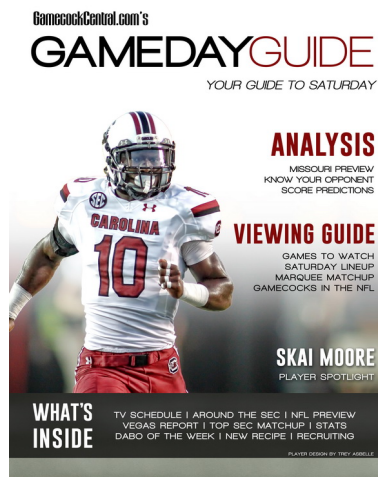
-- Botkin said consistency remains elusive for the linebacker corps as a whole, although Roberts has been more consistent than Lewis or Holloman.

-- Botkin said Sharrod Golightly has gotten the majority of the snaps at spur because he has been more consistent than Jordan Diggs, who must still "trust what his eyes are seeing and do the little things right," Botkin said.

-- Botkins said USC was able to utilize the 3-4 alignment in previous years, but this campaign marks the first time they've employed different personnel in the package.

-- Grady Brown says that the USC defensive backs had a perfect opportunity to put a team away, but they

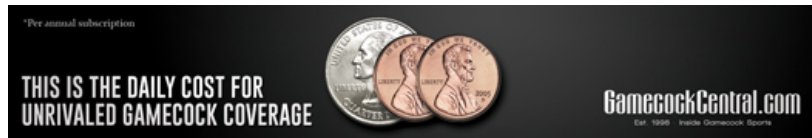
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