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## Garrison Gist making his mark in weightlifting ... and art

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USC football walk-on fullback Garrison Gist, from Rock Hill has competed in powerlifting competitions and is also an artist. One of his art pieces is a drawing of Coach Steve Spurrier.

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Being the only football-playing, power-lifting art major makes walk-on Gamecocks fullback unique

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Man, look at that guy. About as thick as he is tall, biceps like cantaloupes, folks crossing the street just to get out of his way. No need to see the “Gamecock football” slogan stretched tightly across his massive chest – kind of obvious that guy plays football.

What’s he doing going into the art building?

“I’ve been doing art since probably about third grade,” South Carolina backup fullback Garrison Gist said. “I started tracing, and tracing got old, so I practiced drawing more. It’s really kind of paying off for me.”

Yes, he's a football player, and the build came from the game and a newly discovered passion – and talent – for powerlifting. But the easygoing smile and the love for drawing has him at USC as an art studio major, which tells the real story.

Other football players are seen at the training table or at school-sponsored tutoring sessions, enjoying their free plane rides and free hotel rooms before playing on national TV, and the thought is that they've got it made. The adulation that comes with it seems to be a fair tradeoff for the time spent in study hall, the weight room and in team meetings.

Gist handles that, plus a full workload in a major that requires many hours outside the classroom, plus pays for his own schooling. A walk-on, Gist is required to do all of the practices and activities of a scholarship player, knowing full well it's not going to be easy for him to make a dress list for a game, much less play. He'd be lucky if anyone knew his jersey number, never mind his name, to ask for an autograph.

So he makes his mark in other ways.

"I talked to him about academics today," running backs coach Everette Sands recently said. "He has two music classes, a ceramics class, an art class. He's down there having fun, he's working hard. One thing is he's always going to do a good job, and give you all he has. He'd love to get an opportunity to show what he can do."

And that could be on the field, a return to where he already has become known in the powerlifting world, or simply at home, sketching tomorrow's assignment. Teammates are starting to become aware of his artistic talent, after he found an online sketch and drew his own version.

A shirtless Steve Spurrier begs to be put on a poster; Gist did it on a print that hangs in his room.

"That's the one I get the most comments on," Gist said. "Coach (Steve) Spurrier Jr. saw it, but I haven't shown it to (Spurrier Sr.) yet. I'll probably have to wait until after the season."

Gist last played organized football in 2010, playing right tackle to protect current Tennessee quarterback Justin Worley as the two completed their senior years in style, leading Northwestern High to a 15-0 state championship season. Current USC defensive tackle Gerald Dixon Jr. also was on that team, and Gist was going to USC as well, but wanted to get his academics straight before he tried out for football.

During that time, he worked at his art while also honing another craft. At the urge of a high school coach, Gist began working at competitive weightlifting.

"It just kind of happened," he said. "I never really thought about it, and he asked me if I wanted to try, and I was like, 'Sure.' "

Gist broke four national records and four state records for his age group in his first competition. Last year, he again placed first in his age group. He's not actively powerlifting anymore, with football taking up his time, but he still maintains the specific workout plan for it in case he ever wants to take it back up.

He hasn't lost anything to the untrained eye; Gist walked into the USC weight room on Friday and casually lifted a 135-pound bar over his head without so much as a pause to chalk his hands.

Football has taken over a good chunk of his life, as has art. He's best at drawing but is starting to work with more 3-D, clay and wire, and those projects have him doing the coffee-IV routine of many college students. His typical day begins with a 5:30 a.m. alarm for a 6 a.m. workout, classes and meetings, practice, homework and bed around midnight, 12:30 a.m. at the latest. A nap here or there is a luxury.

Art classes last over two hours each, and then there's the outside commitment to get projects done, which is another 8-10 hours per week. Being the only football-playing art major is certainly unique. "I haven't seen too many of the other guys out there," Gist mused.

But since he plays football and cuts a rather imposing and distinct figure, it wasn't long before he was tagged with another handle beside "art-major powerlifting fullback." In a meeting one day, Sands stuck him.

“He said, ‘You know what? I’m going to call you Oompa Loompa, or Oomp. Because you’re short, and you just remind me of an Oompa Loompa,’ ” Gist said. “At first, the guys gave me a hard time about it, but now I just let it go. Then somebody interviewed Mike (Davis) and Mike said it in an interview.”

It’s doubtful that any of Willy Wonka’s fictional followers ever dead-lifted over 550 pounds, but at least Gist is becoming known. Whether it’s the picture of his coach, his prowess in the weight room or the work ethic to being the best person he can be, Gist might just be asked for an autograph one day, whether he plays or not.

“It took a little while to get used to it,” Gist said. “Doing something you like, it’s not that hard. I’m just taking it every day, one day at a time. Every chance I get, whenever they call my name, I’ll be ready.”

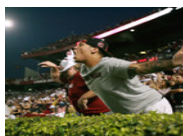
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