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Surratt flying under the radar on D-line

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J.T. Surratt has earned a starting spot at defensive tackle for USC.

FILE PHOTOGRAPH — the state

By NEIL WHITE — nwhite@thestate.com

South Carolina's defensive front is drawing plenty of preseason attention, highlighted, of course, by defensive end Jadeveon Clowney, the Heisman Trophy candidate expected to be the No. 1 pick in the NFL draft next year.

Tackle Kelcy Quarles, who has started 17 games in his career, and end Chaz Sutton, who's expected to have a breakout season as Clowney's opposite number, also are receiving plenty of notice.

But that other tackle spot — the one vacated by Byron Jerideau — is flying under the radar as camp

comes to a close. J.T. Surratt, the 6-foot-2, 307-pound redshirt junior, is hoping that he can begin to command some attention of his own as he looks to fill that role.

“When the opportunity presents itself, you’ve got to step up and take advantage. I knew once that he (Jerideau) left, the opportunity was there,” Surratt said. “I know there are other guys who are qualified for the starting job, too. At the same time, our D-line as a whole has great players. I’m just ready to get out there and help the team any way I can.”

The Winston-Salem, N.C., native gained valuable experience last season, as he made 14 tackles in the final 10 games, including 2.5 tackles for loss and a half-sack. New defensive line coach Deke Adams is impressed by Surratt, who is battling with sophomore Gerald Dixon Jr., for the starting role.

“I think J.T. has really stepped it up this fall camp and done a good job, so he holds the edge right now,” Adams said. “Junior has done a good job and is pushing him hard. Anything can happen. Right now, that’s where we are at.”

Surratt enjoys playing alongside his fellow linemates.

“Playing with those guys pushes me. It makes me want to step up my game,” he said. “It’s the same with the rest of the guys. They make me want to be better. They make me want to bring my A-game every day.”

Surratt showed a few flashes of that A-game in 2012, when he had a tackle for loss and a quarterback hurry in the win against Missouri and a half-sack in the win against Clemson. He smiles when discussing the accolades Clowney has drawn over the past year, adding that defensive linemen aren’t above giving their celebrated teammate a little grief.

“We mess with him a lot,” Surratt said. “But who doesn’t like attention? I like attention, too.”

Sutton has watched Surratt progress each day of camp as the tackle shows he can fit in with his higher-profile teammates.

“J.T.’s coming along pretty good. He’s getting better and better every day with practice,” Sutton said. “We expect a lot out of J.T. this year. He knows he has to step up and be a starter and a leader on this defense. We all expect great things from him.”

Surratt can’t wait to tackle somebody wearing a different uniform when his chance to stand out arrives against North Carolina at Williams-Brice Stadium.

“Camp has gone great. We got better as a team, and I got better on my fundamentals. I didn’t take a step back. I took a step forward. I’m glad the season is near, and I’m ready to go,” he said. “When the time comes, and my name is called, I’m going to be ready. I’m going to give my all, every play, every down.”

GoGamecocks’ Josh Kendall and David Cloninger answer five questions facing South Carolina in 2013, in the fourth of five videos that will be published this week. Coming Friday: Five predictions for this year’s team.

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