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With Jadeveon Clowney gone, Gamecocks look to Skai Moore



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South Carolina's Skai Moore tries to adjust to Georgia's offense on Saturday, Sept. 7, 2013 in Athens, Ga. (Travis Bell/Sideline Carolina)

Sophomore linebacker takes the reins as leader of defense

By david caraviello

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COLUMBIA - His mother wanted to give him a first name that conveyed unlimited potential. So she looked to the heavens.

"My mom, she told me when she would look into the sky, she would think about infinity," said South Carolina linebacker Skai Moore. "Just linking me with infinite possibilities."

On the football field, at the very least, the meaning behind the moniker certainly seems appropriate. On a Gamecocks defense where a certain No. 1 overall draft pick commanded the most attention from media members and offensive coordinators alike, it was the true freshman Moore - lightly recruited in his home state of Florida - who made perhaps the biggest breakthrough, leading South Carolina in both interceptions and total tackles despite starting just four games in 2013.

But now Jadeveon Clowney is gone, along with two other starters from that defensive line, and the spotlight shifts to one of the deeper linebacker corps in the Southeastern Conference.

[Enlarge](#) South Carolina's Skai Moore closes

in on Missouri wide receiver Bud Sasser during a game last season. L.G. Patterson/ap

That's certainly reflected in the four-linebacker system the ninth-ranked Gamecocks have been toying with in practice for Thursday night's opener against Texas A&M, a departure from the 4-2-5 look of previous seasons.

"We feel like we have a pretty good two-deep depth chart right now. Three-deep, in some places," said linebackers coach Kirk Botkin. ". We've got great competition at every position, and that brings out the best in some football players."

It's a stark difference from a season ago, when there was so little experience at linebacker, a first-year player like Moore was able to seize the opportunity. Although the player who started the other nine games last season, Marcquis Roberts, remains in the mix, he entered preseason camp third on the depth chart. The competition for those linebacker positions is that strong, and getting stronger - true freshman Bryson Allen-Williams has put himself in position to start at one of the outside spots, with Moore and Kaiwan Lewis anchoring the inside, and a spur like Sharrod Golightly on the other end.

"We have a lot of talent. This is probably the most talent that I've seen in one linebacker corps," Allen-Williams said. "And they're all mentors to younger guys like me. I'm the only newcomer. With Kaiwan and Sherrod and all those guys, they're really trying to mold me into a great linebacker, and I try to look to those guys for insight."

The textbook model, though, is Moore, whose two interceptions in the bowl victory over Wisconsin capped a freshman campaign that saw him finish with 56 total tackles and four picks, both tops on the team. He was able to get on the field because of a relative lack of veteran presence at his position, and his own ability to quickly pick up the playbook. Then he was able to capitalize thanks in part to all the attention given to Clowney and his more heralded mates on the defensive front.

"Yeah, definitely," Moore said. "I feel like those guys in the front were some of the great players in the country. They were known as some of the great players in the country, and they were spotlighted. But I guess they opened up some spots for us to make some plays, and I really do appreciate that D-line last year. Really appreciate those guys."

Of course, it wasn't all the focus on Clowney - someone had to make the plays when the opportunity was there. Botkin raves about Moore's knack for the football, and his ability to read the opposing quarterback's eyes.

"Skai is a very athletic linebacker, and he's getting better," added Gamecocks defensive coordinator Lorenzo Ward. "He's just got to keep coming. He plays fast, and he's got great ball skills."

And this year, he has more pieces around him. Lewis made 10 starts last year, T.J. Holloman played in all 13 games, and Golightly was named second-team All-SEC. Allen-Williams aside, there's not much green on this unit anymore.

"As linebackers, I feel like we can stop the run against anybody we play," Lewis said. "We're older now, and more developed, and we know what we're doing in the linebacking corps."

"I feel like we're a lot better than we were a year ago," added Moore, who said the game truly began to slow down for him in a six-tackle outing at Tennessee. "We have a lot more experience, just game-time experience. We know the playbook a lot better, we know where our help is coming from, pre-snap reads and all that good stuff. We're a lot more confident, so that's good."

Of course, opposing offenses are aware of that, as well. Are Moore and his linebackers in store for tactics like those which targeted Clowney and the defensive front a season ago?

"It may be," he said. "And if it is, we're ready for it. It's about whoever can go out there and make the most the plays, and I'm confident that we can."

Any why wouldn't he be? Skai Moore is named for infinite possibilities, after all.

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