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# For Gamecocks' Michael Washington, military lessons evident on football field



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South Carolina defensive end Michael Washington started for the first time last week against Furman. (Photo by Travis Ball/SIDELINE CAROLINA)

#### NEXT GAME

WHO: South Carolina (4-3, 2-3 SEC) at No. 5 Auburn (5-1, 2-1)

WHEN: Saturday, 7:30 p.m.

WHERE: Jordan-Hare Stadium, Auburn, Ala.

TV: SEC Network

LINE: Auburn by 17½

COLUMBIA - Coming out of Allendale-Fairfax High School, Michael Washington was an athlete who played football solely for himself. Coming out of the Marines, he was a military veteran who had learned the necessity of teamwork.

As much as anything else, that personal transformation is what led the walk-on defensive end to a place in South Carolina's starting lineup last week against Furman, where Washington recorded three tackles and recovered a fumble. It's been a long journey - via Allendale, Parris Island, Iraq, Aiken and Orangeburg - but for USC's oldest player, it's been worth it.

"You have to learn that you have to stay positive," said Washington, 27. "I knew I was going to get opportunities sooner or later. I worked hard in the weight room, I try to do all my assignments, try to do my job at practice. So I knew I was going to get my opportunity. And when you

get it, you just have to make the most of it."

2 Although Washington played last season against Coastal Carolina, Furman was a different experience. Injuries on USC's defensive line left the Gamecocks (4-3, 2-3 SEC) thin at end, and

the Friday before the game. His immediate reactions were surprise, and then nervousness - not over the prospect of playing, but potentially making mistakes and letting his teammates down.

What a difference that was from the 200-pound high school safety who made 95 tackles as a junior at Allendale-Fairfax, but was primarily concerned with himself. Four years in the Marines, which included basic training at Parris Island and a tour of duty in Iraq, changed everything.

"I was a 'me' player coming out of high school. I thought, 'I'm going to get mine.' I wasn't worried about the team," said Washington, now 237 pounds. "You go into the military, your whole mindset had to change. It's all about teamwork. It's all about the man next to you. So it helped me out tremendously to come play football and to be a better team player."

Washington had scholarship offers out of high school, and had planned to go to N.C. State. Although he said he qualified academically, he ended up in the Marines.

"To tell you the truth, I still don't know why I did it," he said.

He served in Iraq, where he performed patrols, worked gate checkpoints and saw improvised explosive devices go off. Although he said he was never in any immediate personal danger, he witnessed others freezing up, and learned the value of falling back on training.

"That made me feel like - OK, I'm ready," he said of the experience. "If I can do that, I'm prepared for anything."

Upon returning home, Washington started college at USC Aiken, but missed football. Although his goal was to play at South Carolina, he first walked on at S.C. State, where a cousin also played.

"I was out of football since high school, so I was like, 'OK, let me go to a I-AA (school) and get my feet wet before I jump back into big-boy football,'" Washington said. "That's what I was trying to do."

Washington walked on at South Carolina in the spring of 2012, and played mainly with the scout team last season. "He has served duty and he's a mature young man, that's for sure," head coach Steve Spurrier said. "Hopefully, his leadership can maybe help our guys grow up a little bit. He's a good guy to have on the team."





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