





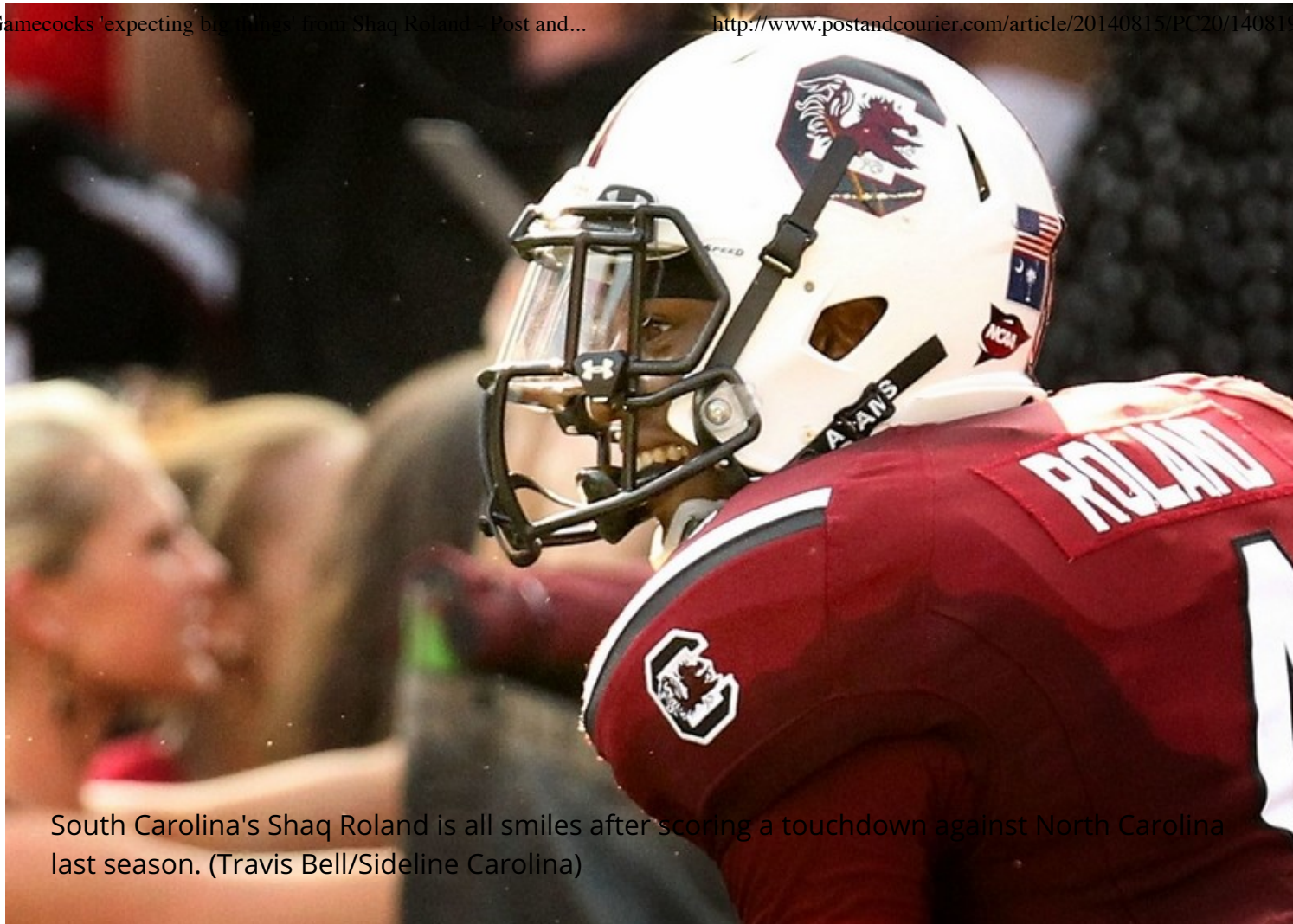
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Gamecocks 'expecting big things' from Shaq Roland

BY CHRIS DEARING Special to The Post and Courier

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South Carolina's Shaq Roland is all smiles after scoring a touchdown against North Carolina last season. (Travis Bell/Sideline Carolina)

COLUMBIA - Junior wide receiver Shaq Roland has been in the spotlight since he first stepped on the South Carolina campus. Unfortunately for him, it's been mainly for the wrong reasons in his first two seasons.

But he - and the coaching staff - believe year three will finally produce the results people were expecting when he arrived in school after being named "Mr. Football" during his senior season at nearby Lexington High School.



"Coming in, I had a lot of hype surrounding me. Some people might have thought it got to my head a bit," Roland said. "But each year, I've gotten better mentally and physically. I've learned how to read coverages. I know the playbook like the back of my hand. That really gives you confidence. When you know what you're doing, it means you can play to the best of your ability."

Roland had the challenge of living up to the three previous Mr. Football's that all attended South Carolina.

Roland's first career catch against Wisconsin. Rolan
Gamecocks' 34-24 victory last season at the
Capital One Bowl. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

It started
with
Stephon
Gilmore,

followed by Marcus Lattimore and Jadeveon Clowney.
All three came in and made an immediate impact with
the Gamecocks. It's no coincidence all three are in the
NFL right now.

So with that large shadow hanging over his head,
Roland failed to impress. His freshman season almost
was a total waste as he had to adjust to playing against
players as talented - or more talented - than he was. He saw action in 11 games but caught just five
passes for 80 yards. Only two of those receptions came in an SEC game.

Then last season opened with a bang. Making his first career start, the 6-1, 176-pound Roland
caught a 65-yard yard touchdown pass on the third play from scrimmage in the season opener
against North Carolina. But things were still slow to develop after that.

Any progress that was made seemed to be interrupted by a three-game suspension during the
middle of the year for unspecified violation of team rules. It was a wake-up call and learning
experience for sure.

"Everybody goes through adversity in life," Roland said. "I think that was good for me to just get my
head straight. I can't do whatever I was doing. I turned a negative into a positive, and going into this
season, it will help me a lot by making me stay focused."

It was when Roland returned to the lineup that he finally began to live up to expectations. The first
flashes were a two-touchdown performance - from 14 and 43 yards - against Mississippi State. He
added four catches for 72 yards and a touchdown against Coastal Carolina and had three catches
with a touchdown against Clemson.

Roland saved his best for last - a 112-yard, six-reception performance in the Capital One Bowl win
over Wisconsin.

He finished the season with 25 receptions for 455 yards and a team-best 18.2 yards per catch. In the
final five games, he had 16 grabs for 290 yards and four scores. That was more consistent with the
numbers he was expected to put up from the outset.

"He has come a long way. When he first got here, I think he was a little arrogant," wide receivers
coach Steve Spurrier Jr. said. "He was used to being a little more talented than most people."

Roland does not shy away from the fact the learning curve was probably a little bit larger than he expected.

"You've got to know how to get open," Roland said. "You've got to know where the quarterback is going to throw it. You've got to have the timing. There's just a lot to know and coming in, I didn't know that."

Roland will be counted on heavily to make the quarterback transition to senior Dylan Thompson a smooth one. Nick Jones, Damiere Byrd and Pharoh Cooper all should contribute, but it's Roland who has the ability to be a game-changer.

"He has a chance to be as good as he wants to be," Spurrier Jr. said. "He's worked hard this offseason and we're expecting big things from him."

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