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## Aleighsa Welch the glue that cements Gamecocks' unity

By DAVID CLONINGER

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Aleighsa Welch is an integral part of the USC women's basketball team.

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- PRESEASON ALL-SEC

## FIRST TEAM

Martha Alwal, Mississippi State

**Tiffany Mitchell, South Carolina**

**Aleighsa Welch, South Carolina**

Isabelle Harrison, Tennessee

Courtney Walker, Texas A&M

## PLAYER OF THE YEAR

**Tiffany Mitchell, South Carolina**

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CHARLOTTE — The results were the same in October as they were in March – South Carolina’s Tiffany Mitchell and Aleighsa Welch were picked as two of the SEC’s best players, with Mitchell being named player of the year.

It was expected, after each won first-team all-SEC honors and Mitchell was named SEC Player of the Year after the Gamecocks’ sterling 2013-14 season. Entering the 2014-15 season as the pick for repeat league champ, Welch and Mitchell each saw their name on the five-member preseason All-SEC team, and Mitchell again saw her name as player of the year.

Welch smiled and congratulated her teammate. As much as she wants the award, as long as it’s kept among Gamecocks, she can live with it.

“We talked about it last year, and she told me it would have been even better if we would have been able to share it, but I think she deserved it,” Welch said Tuesday at SEC Media Days. “I was just happy to make the all-SEC team.”

Mitchell had a stupendous sophomore season, leading the Gamecocks with 15.5 points per game as one of two players to start all 34 games. She was fifth in the SEC with 62 steals, 10th in assists and averaged more than five rebounds per game.

Welch averaged 13.7 points and 7.6 rebounds, and had 47 blocks, 67 assists and 29 steals as the Gamecocks’ second-leading scorer. The senior received votes for player of the year, but voters were split on who to pick between she and Mitchell as both had done so much for the regular-season champions.

Mitchell said the same last year – she wished she could have shared the award with Welch. She knew the sacrifices Welch had made on her behalf, getting Mitchell more involved in scoring and feeding her the extra pass instead of taking a layup for herself. She was surprised that she received the honor last year and this year.

“Actually, no one told me yet,” Mitchell said. “Thank you for that information. It’s a good feeling to know that people hold me to that standard.”

It’s the same as what Welch holds for herself. If she can help her team win and get her teammates individual awards at the same time, it’s a perfect scenario.

“I want to make the best shot available and, a lot of times, I want to make sure my teammates are in the best position to score,” Welch said. “I know I can score and I know I can also force a lot of things at

times, but I want to be a better all-around player. Being around players like Tiffany who are so unselfish has made me even more unselfish.”

Welch’s contributions to get Mitchell into her takeover role haven’t gone unnoticed.

“I think everybody knows the type of player Tiffany Mitchell is, and Tiffany Mitchell doesn’t become our conference player of the year just from her play,” USC coach Dawn Staley said. “I think she’s got a lot of weapons beside her that have played an integral role in our success, and Aleighsa Welch is one of them.”

Welch was Staley’s first instate recruit at USC. She was the one who blended with five gritty seniors when she was a freshman to get the Gamecocks into the NCAA tournament. Since then, she has evolved into the backbone of the team.

“She’s probably the one that flies under the radar somewhat, because she’s so unselfish,” Staley said. “She’s our utility player any time we need something – a big bucket, a big rebound – she’s always been there. It’s unfortunate that they couldn’t share the award, because she’s been making big plays for us.”

Welch might sacrifice more of her individual production this year, because the Gamecocks have more weapons around her and Mitchell. With SEC Freshman of the Year Alaina Coates, Elem Ibiam and a sheaf of freshmen ranked the No. 2 recruiting class in the country, Staley will want all to get early, productive playing time. Welch will be relied on to make sure the Gamecocks have a comfortable lead, and then can start passing the ball.

If it doesn’t result in player of the year, that’s OK. Welch will take a lot of rejection if it means USC can accept the national championship.

“We’ve got that mutual understanding,” she said. “Of course it’s one of my goals, but if there’s one person I can share it with, I wouldn’t want to share it with anybody else but Tiffany.”

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