

Behind Moore, USC defense regaining grip



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(Photo: MYKAL McELDOWNEY, Staff)

COLUMBIA – After his team's upset loss to South Carolina, Georgia All-American tailback Todd Gurley had particular praise for one Gamecocks defender.

"Those guys tackled better," Gurley said of the USC defense when asked to compare it to Clemson's unit. "That one dude didn't miss many tackles. When he got his hands on me he was able to tackle me or hold me up and wait for help."

"That one dude" was revealed to be Skai Moore, and it had to be a refreshing change for the sophomore linebacker.

A Southeastern Conference all-freshman team and second-team All-American after leading USC in tackles (56) and interceptions (four) in 2013, Moore's sophomore season did not begin smoothly.

After being chided in preseason by USC defensive coordinator Lorenzo Ward and linebackers coach Kirk Botkin for a lack of intensity, Moore found himself on the sideline for the Gamecocks' opener against Texas A&M.

Moore was on the field for Carolina's second defensive series, although his performance did not stand out.

He earned a start against East Carolina, but after the game, he was exhorted by USC coach Steve Spurrier to pick up the pace.

Against the then No. 6-ranked Bulldogs, Moore did just that.

After watching Gurley break through an early tackle attempt, Moore didn't miss again and finished with a team-leading 10 tackles.

"It inspired me a lot," Moore said of the early missed tackle. "Right after I missed that first tackle, I tried to tell myself it was definitely not happening again the rest of the game. I didn't want any opportunity to happen on me. I wanted to make my job and the team's job easier by just making tackles."

Botkin was pleased with Moore's performance -- he now leads USC with 23 tackles, including one sack -- but is looking for more.

"He's got stuff to work on like they all do," Botkin said of Moore. "He made some really good tackles out in open space. I was proud of the way he played. He played hard. They all played hard."

"We're getting better. We're not there yet. We need a little more consistency. We're getting better."

Moore's performance even caught Spurrier's attention.

"He's making some tackles," Spurrier said. "Hopefully, we can give him some help with the other guys out there. Skai is a good player. He did have a good game the other night. Got a game ball for making a whole bunch of tackles."

Moore concedes that part of his improvement was tied to the knowledge that Georgia played a traditional offense that challenges opponents physically, but he said the defense was determined to show it was better than it showed in the first two games.

"We knew we were facing a tough opponent in Georgia," Moore said. "We knew their running game was big and they had a lot of good running backs. We challenged each other, individually, as a defense to go out there and prove a point to the nation that those first two games were not a resemblance of what our defense usually is."

"I think we kind of did that." x
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