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Marcquis Roberts brings an edge to Gamecocks' 'D'

By NEIL WHITE

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South Carolina linebacker Marcquis Roberts (21)

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- Gamecocks vs. Wildcats

WHO: USC (3-2, 2-2 SEC) vs. Kentucky (3-1, 1-1)

WHERE: Commonwealth Stadium, Lexington, Ky.

WHEN: Saturday, 7:30 p.m.

TV: SEC Network

RADIO: 107.5 FM

SATELLITE RADIO: Sirius 93/XM 190

LINE: USC by 4 (over-under is 56 points)

Marcquis Roberts wears No. 21 in honor of his sporting hero. But it's not a football player that the South Carolina redshirt sophomore linebacker admires.

It's former NBA superstar Dominique Wilkins, whose high-flying Hall of Fame career for the Atlanta Hawks electrified youngsters all over Georgia. Roberts, a Powder Springs, Ga., native, admits that he's more familiar with Wilkins through highlight videos and classic games replayed on television.

And his adoration of the home-state Hawks goes as far as having their logo tattooed on his right arm.

Now he hopes to put his stamp on the USC defense after a career that began with a series of setbacks. A shoulder injury wiped out his freshman season, and a knee injury in the spring ended his second season. But he bounced back last season to start nine of 13 games and compile 48 tackles, fifth on the team.

After a slow start, he made his first start this season against Missouri. The USC defense played its best game this year despite the loss. Roberts had five tackles with one for loss against the Tigers.

"It's been a long process. I'm grateful to have the chance," Roberts said. "I just want to make the team better. Whatever I can do to make the team better, I'm here to do it."

Roberts kept plugging to earn the starting role back from T.J. Holloman and Kaiwan Lewis, who combined to start the first four games at middle linebacker.

"He's been a little more consistent than the other guys and gives us a little confidence and a little edge I think

we have been missing,” USC linebackers coach Kirk Botkin said. “It’s the same thing week in and week out, whoever is making the most plays, whoever is practicing the best, is going to play. We are going to try to put the best ones out there and, right now, he’s one of the better ones.”

Sophomore Skai Moore, who starts at the other linebacker spot, said it’s easy to see what Roberts can bring to the unit.

“Quis is a real lively guy. He brings a lot of energy to practice,” Moore said. “That’s great to have on our team. It really helped us out last game. He provided a lot of energy in critical situations.”

The 6-foot-1, 216-pound Roberts said that’s what he tries to do every day, and he’s glad the coaches and his teammates notice his work ethic, high energy and upbeat attitude.

“It was rough at the beginning, but I had good teammates,” Roberts said. “My family always kept me positive, and I just stayed positive through the whole situation knowing I could still come back and still have a chance to play. ... It’s a part of football. You get hurt. I was blessed to have played for so long and not have been hurt.”

A healthy Roberts will be back in the starting lineup against Kentucky. Botkin said Roberts can help serve as a catalyst in the defense putting together another solid performance.

“Quis is a good physical guy, he’s a good blitzzer,” Botkin said. “He brings a physicalness and he’s a competitor. He wants to be good. He’s a guy we have always liked, just fitting him in where he needs to be. He’s doing some good things right now.”

Roberts hopes those good things can pay off with a victory against the Wildcats. He believes the defense will keep improving.

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