Go Gamecocks

The ball is in his hands: Pharoh Cooper catches on at receiver

By JOSH KENDALL

jkendall@thestate.comSeptember 26, 2014

South Carolina wide receiver Pharoh Cooper (11)

GERRY MELENDEZ — gmelendez@thestate.com

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- CATCHING ON

  The Gamecocks' four wideouts who have received the bulk of the action:

  PHAROH COOPER

  5-11/201, Sophomore

  Stats: 21 catches, 144 yards, 2 TDS

Of note: Career highs of 10 catches, 114 yards vs. Vandy.

NICK JONES

5-7/168, Senior

Stats: 17 catches, 259 yards, 3 TDs

Of note: First 100-yard receiving game vs. Texas A&M.

SHAQ ROLAND

6-1/176, Junior

Stats: 14 catches, 176 yards, 2 TDs

Of note: Career-high seven catches vs. ECU.
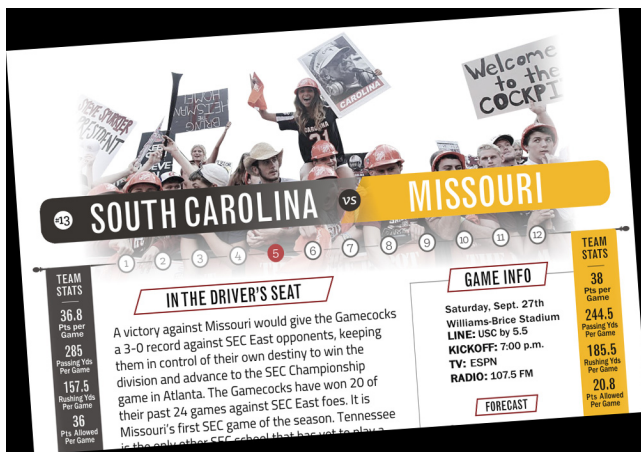
DAMIERE BYRD

5-9, 170, Senior

Stats: 3 catches, 99 yards, 2 TDs

Of note: Averages 33.0 yards per catch.

- # Big Game Graphic preview

   Check out our Big Game Graphic preview of South Carolina vs. Missouri. Look for this football feature Mondays and Thursdays at GoGamecocks.com.

- Gamecocks vs. Tigers

   WHO: USC (3-1, 2-1 SEC) vs. Missouri (3-1, 0-0)

   WHERE: Williams-Brice Stadium

   WHEN: Saturday, 7 p.m

   TV: ESPN

   RADIO: 107.5 FM

   SATELLITE RADIO: Sirius 91/XM 91

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The game Pharoh Cooper is reluctant to call his breakout collegiate performance couldn't have come at a better time for his teammates in South Carolina's wide receiving corps.

Cooper had career highs in catches (10) and yards (114) last week against Vanderbilt. The rest of the wide receivers combined had one more catch (five) than they had drops (four).

"Pharoh certainly had a great day, but outside of that, it was not a great effort by those guys," wide receivers coach Steve Spurrier Jr. said. "Tough week last week."

Three of the dropped passes came from junior Shaq Roland.

"All three of them would have been good catches, but those are catches we expect you to make, so that's disappointing, but he will keep getting his opportunities," Spurrier Jr. said. "Damiere (Byrd) will get his opportunities. The guy that plays the best will play more. I kind of like those guys battling it out there."

The outside receiver position Roland and Byrd share is the only one being contested at the moment as Cooper and Nick Jones are getting almost all the snaps at the other two positions.

Cooper leads the Gamecocks in catches (21) and has 244 yards. Jones is the team's receiving yardage leader with 259 yards on 17 catches, and Roland has 14 catches for 176 yards.

The receivers other than Cooper "are doing OK," coach Steve Spurrier said. "Obviously, one or two balls here or there, we could've hit or didn't quite make the play. But they've had their moments. It's a good bunch of guys. Yeah, they're doing OK. Could they do better? Yeah, they could play better, certainly."

The Gamecocks' lack of comfortable wins has prevented the backup receivers from getting more work this season, Spurrier Jr. said.

"You hope to get some games where a lot of guys get to play and get opportunities and kids feel confident in themselves and you feel confident in them and they can keep rotating in there, but it's also good to have three or four guys that you are comfortable with and let them go play," Spurrier Jr. said.

Upperclassmen Shamier Jeffery, Kane Whitehurst and Carlton Heard do not have a catch this season. K.J. Brent caught his first touchdown against East Carolina on Sept. 6 but hasn't caught a pass since that game.

"Those backup guys deserve to go play," Spurrier Jr. said. "Shamier Jeffery deserves to play. He does. It's just been tight and Shaq and Damiere have been rotating. Hopefully, Shamier will get in there this week."

There is no question Cooper will get his chances after last week's performance.

"You could call it a breakout game being that it's the first time I had a really big game, but as the season goes forward, I am looking to have better games than that," the 5-foot-11, 201-pound sophomore said.

Cooper also is the team's third-leading rusher with seven carries for 89 yards out of the team's wildcat quarterback formation. He's averaging 12.7 yards per carry after a 70-yard run last week.

"He's a good player and he's a wonderful young man," Spurrier said. "I asked him yesterday, 'We're not using you too much, are we?' and he said, 'Coach, I'll be ready.' So he obviously, when he gets his hands on it, is a very good player. We need to find ways to make sure he's running with it."

If Cooper continues to get open like he did against the Commodores, his next big game could come quickly, quarterback Dylan Thompson said.

"I think coverage dictates some of that, and guys that make plays, you want the ball in their hands," Thompson said. "I think every time he touches the ball, something good happens. He's one of many guys we've got on this

team that we are confident in."

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