

A.J. Cann leads in the trenches

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South Carolina senior left guard A.J. Cann has started 38 games over the past three seasons and will lead a group that could be one of the best units in the nation.

Cann has led the Gamecock offensive line as a preseason All-American and All-SEC selection while also being named to the watch lists for the Outland Trophy and the Rotary Lombardi Award. Tackles Corey Robinson and Brandon Shell and center Cody Waldrop have received preseason buzz as well, but Cann knows that projections only mean so much.



"Well you know it's a blessing to be named a preseason All-American and receive all these other accolades to be considered with some of the best guys in the country, but I don't think as a group we pay attention to it. We just have to stay focused, stay hungry, play hard. You know some guys can take the preseason and run with it, but I would rather at the end of the season hopefully be on those lists," Cann commented.

Last season, Cann was the only junior to be named a team captain by his fellow Gamecocks. Head coach Steve Spurrier noted that Cann is a great leader for the team, noting "A.J.'s a lineman, he doesn't say much but he leads by example ... Dylan (Thompson) and A.J. hang around the stadium it seems like all day. They do their workout, they're lifting and a lot of times they hang around and help the freshmen."

Cann and Thompson have a great relationship and have taken on a dual leadership role for the Gamecocks this year. The two are also roommates at South Carolina, so their relationship extends beyond the football field.

"We talk about a lot of things, not just about football. We can go back to each other and figure out what we can do better. Do this, do that, go work on some things. Leadership is one of the things that we talk about as well," Cann said.

In a photo that created some buzz, Cann and Thompson were pictured this offseason working together during the wintry weather that hit Columbia, S.C. Cann explained that this was nothing special, but just two players trying to get better.

"First off we were in the weight room to begin with and then we wanted to go run some drills on the field. So we were just out there doing some drills in the snow and somebody took a picture and it blew up somehow. Really we were just out there having fun ... there wasn't to much more to it than us out there working and having a little fun," Cann said.

Thompson noted he is thankful to have such a talented and experienced offensive line protecting him this year.

"It's a huge blessing to be behind those guys. Just watching them work I think is something huge," Thompson said. "We go in in the morning, then I'll go in in the afternoon just to get something in and our offensive line is just in there grinding, putting in extra work.

"Just seeing that and knowing those guys care about what they do, that they want to be great themselves is just something that is really encouraging," Thompson added.

There has been speculation that this group could be the best offensive line to play under Spurrier which Cann attributes to their experience.

"A lot of the guys now have experience, been playing about two or three years. That's what it is just having veteran guys, guys that have experience, have been in games and have been playing together that long is pretty solid for us," Cann explained. "Coach Elliott has been doing a good job of coaching us.

1 of 2
"As long as we stay focused, stay humble and keep working hard, I think we'll have another solid group this year. A lot of people look at us and say we're one of the best offensive lines Coach Spurrier has had, but as long as we keep working hard, we will have the chance to be

10/20/14 10:16 AM

that," Cann continued.

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Spurrier even noted that this talk may have some merit.

"The offensive line is about all back. Ronald Patrick is the only one that we've lost up front, so these guys could be really good. They could be, but they've got to get a little meaner I think, a little tougher, but they are capable," Spurrier said. "They've got a chance to be a real good one. Like I said, they've all played a bunch, they've just got to go play. They know what to do, now we've got to go do it."

Cann said that he hears the talk and knows that the group will have to go out and live up to the hype on the field.

"I think as a group, we have a chance to be the best group that we've ever had here and I think that we can do that ... we just need to go out there and go play, then at the end of the season we'll see," Cann said.

****Story by Mike Kucharski/Photo by Brian Hand****