

Tech freshman receiver has 'star' written all over

In the case of Texas Tech wide receiver Michael Crabtree, the highlights are well ahead of the hype.

For now.

Many who saw Crabtree practice his ball-snagging skills while a redshirt last fall came away convinced he was the best receiver in coach Mike Leach's program. Considering that All-Big 12 receivers Jarrett Hicks and Joel Filani were still on the team, it was heady praise, especially for a freshman.

Finally on the field, Crabtree has lived up to the praise and is starting to generate some national hype. Before he's through, many believe, he could figure into discussions about the best players ever to wear a Red Raiders uniform.

After only three games, Crabtree leads the nation with 38 catches, eight of them for touchdowns.

"Whenever you call my number, I'm going to do my job out there," Crabtree says of his sizzling start. "I always expect 'great.' I work for 'great' and then see what I can do better."

Going into Tech's Big 12 opener against Oklahoma State on Saturday, Crabtree is riding a wave of improving numbers every week. In Tech's 59-24 blowout of Rice last weekend in Houston, he piled up 244 yards, a single-game record for Big 12 freshmen.

He fell only 19 yards short of the national freshman record.

"We all thought he was going to be good," Leach says.

"There was always the question of how quick could he adjust. And he's adjusted quickly. He's got a lot of confidence, and he's just excited to play, which I think is a great combination."

Because of his size — his 208 pounds float on an impressive 6-foot-3 frame — and because of his considerable physical skills, Crabtree may be able to deliver something the Red Raiders haven't enjoyed in decades:

A marquee name to personify the program.

A star player to provide personality to the "it's-all-because-of-the-system" tag commonly applied to Leach's pass-heavy offense.

Crabtree's 38 catches to date have accounted for 538 yards. He has one more TD than all three of Tech's opponents combined. And, still, he hasn't been used to any meaningful extent in the fourth quarter of any game.

"We've known from the beginning he was going to be special," Tech quarterback Graham Harrell says. "He's had some big games for us, and that's the scary thing: As he continues to get better, he's going to be a really good player."

As if he's not already.

If Crabtree maintains his current pace, he would finish with 152 receptions, 2,152 yards and 32 TD catches over the course of a 12-game schedule. All would be Division I-A single-season records.

Crabtree's big start is even more remarkable considering he never played receiver before arriving at Tech. He played quarterback at Dallas Carter and was recruited almost as much for his basketball abilities as his football skills. In the summer of 2006, he earned MVP honors at the Texas High School Coaches Association All-Star Game.

The basketball all-star game.

That two-sport background and his lack of a true football position prompted some football recruiters to shy away from him. He chose Tech over offers from Iowa, Kansas, Illinois, Oklahoma and Texas A&M.

Earlier this summer, Crabtree talked about joining the Red Raiders' basketball program after football season ended. Now he says he'll devote himself to learning the nuances of playing receiver.

Harrell, he says, has provided great assistance in helping him meet his objectives.

"I look at Graham, and he looks at me, and it's like we have a connection," Crabtree says. "It makes it even better that we have this connection — then we just go from there."

Crabtree says his only regret is that the two weren't able to hook up even earlier. Crabtree had hopes to play last season, but he wasn't ruled eligible under NCAA Clearinghouse rules until three games into the season.

With the return of starters Filani, Hicks, Robert Johnson and Danny Amendola, Tech coaches decided to redshirt him.

"It was hard because I wanted to play," Crabtree says. "So I went back and tried to learn as much as I could to get ready when I finally did get the chance."

He showed flashes in Tech's spring game when he hauled in two TD passes. Over the summer, he dropped 17 unwanted pounds and improved his quickness.

"I think I get better after every game," Crabtree says. "I can tell looking at my mistakes and trying to correct them. Then, we go to the next game."

What's next?

To some, Crabtree's combination of size, instincts, power and speed bring back memories of Charley Taylor, the Grand Prairie product who developed into an NFL hall of famer with the Washington Redskins.

"He hates to come off the field," Leach says of Crabtree.

"Michael loves to be out there in one capacity or another. He's got all those things you would like in a player, and his enthusiasm has definitely rubbed off on the other players."

San Antonio Express-News, Tim Griffin

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