

LONGHORNS FOOTBALL

Orakpo ready to take over at defensive end

With Crowder and Robinson gone, it's time for new leaders to step up.

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Brian Orakpo still gets made fun of when he goes home and has dinner with his family.

"And to think, you wanted to be a basketball player!" they say.

"And now look, 'Ooh, it's Mr. Big Football Player.' "

The truth is, when Orakpo was growing up, sacking the quarterback wasn't a big priority for him.

"I was way more into basketball," Texas' starting defensive end recalled. "But when I started growing in high school, I had to switch from blocking shots to rushing the quarterback."

Turns out he's pretty good at the latter. The 6-foot-4-inch, 250-pound junior is one of many reasons why the No. 4 ranked Longhorns aren't worried about the loss of ends Tim Crowder and Brian Robison to the NFL, even though they combined for 16 of Texas' 38 sacks in 2006.

"With Aaron Lewis and Brian Orakpo at end, we won't drop off much from where we were a year ago," Longhorn co-defensive coordinator Duane Akina said of a duo that has combined for two sacks the past two years. "You're talking about two talented defensive ends who've been backing up our starters for the past two years."

While Orakpo is confident the defensive line is going to be one of the Longhorns' biggest strengths, he isn't about to talk himself up yet.

He understands that's not the smartest thing to do. Not when last year's rush defense gave up just 61.2 yards per contest. Not when last year's defensive ends forced constant pressure. Not when he's lining up next to two guys who have already received plenty of accolades — defensive tackles Frank Okam and Derek Lokey.

"Aaron Lewis and I are just going to do what we can. And we have a lot of guys that can have some of the capabilities that Tim did," Orakpo said. "Eddie Jones is playing tremendous, Lamarr Houston, Henry Melton, even the young guys are looking great. So we're just going to go out there and give it the best that we can, and if I get double-digit sacks than that'll be great for our defense. If not, I'm sure those other guys are going to be the ones getting sacks."

That's Orakpo's focus so far: team.

Ask him about what he's doing well, and he responds with an answer about Lewis.

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Ask about the defensive line, and he talks about the entire defense.

Ask him about the young secondary, and he replies with how good they're going to be.

"It's about leadership," Orakpo said. "Getting older means maturing and being a leader on this team."

Orakpo used to be the one asking questions. He would pepper Crowder and Robison about technique and footwork and attitude.

Now, there are less-experienced defensive ends like Jones, Houston and Melton looking to Orakpo.

"I like it when the younger guys come up to me and ask questions, because a lot of times they're asking the same questions that I asked," Orakpo said. "I feel like I owe it to the guys who helped me to help the new guys out. I owe it to the team."

atrubow@statesman.com; 445-3959

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