



Freshman running back Charles nearly in charge at Texas

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AUSTIN — As far as Texas receiver Brian Carter is concerned, there is no debate.

Freshman running back Jamaal Charles should start for the No.2 Longhorns tonight against Rice.

On defense.

In Carter's view, Charles' vicious takedown of Ohio State linebacker A.J. Hawk after an interception last week proves as much.

"Jamaal hit him good," Carter said. "I think it shows he's got a lot of big plays in him."

Whether Charles will draw the start at his natural position remains to be seen.

UT coach Mack Brown made two things clear this week:

No.1 — If healthy, junior Selvin Young is still the team's starting tailback. No.2 — Brown has no qualms starting Charles if he must.

Given the growing state of Young's medical chart — which also includes an acute case of fumble-itis — option No.2 is increasingly likely.

Charles, who 10 months ago was playing high school ball at Port Arthur Memorial, appears ready for his close-up.

His time as a backup could be nearing an end.

"I'm just trying to play the game," said Charles, who rushed for 4,000 yards and 54 touchdowns in his final two prep seasons. "I can't get big-headed. I can't let my head get bigger than my helmet."

Given what Charles has accomplished in just two games as a collegian, it could be time to fit him for a bigger helmet.

Two weeks ago, Charles produced the top debut for a freshman in UT history — rushing for 135 yards and a touchdown against Louisiana-Lafayette.

In the white-hot crucible of Ohio Stadium last week, Charles officially came of age.

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He accounted for 95 total yards in UT's comeback victory, including several key pass receptions in the fourth quarter.

If the only question was how Charles would react to a pressure-cooker environment, "he passed with flying colors," Brown said.

In doing so, Charles — the golden boy from the Golden Triangle — has captured the imagination of Longhorns fans.

Despite Charles' speed — he ran the 300-meter hurdles faster than any high school athlete in the nation last year — few at UT expected him to come so far, so fast.

Coaches rave about his football knowledge. Quarterback Vince Young is amazed at Charles' quick study of blocking schemes. Everyone seems surprised by his uncanny ability to catch the ball.

Certainly, Charles seems more advanced at this stage of his career than former UT All-American Cedric Benson.

"You can tell he's an excellent player," Rice coach Ken Hatfield said. "You can't always tell he's a freshman."

It was Charles' un-freshman-like hit on Hawk, however, that dominated talk in UT's film room this week.

Charles missed the initial shot on Hawk near the right sideline. He picked himself off the turf, hurdled a prone Buckeyes player, and eventually caught Hawk on the left sideline.

Charles leveled the burly Ohio State All-American with one stunning blast. Like Cassius Clay glowering over a fallen Joe Frazier, Charles lingered a minute to survey his handiwork.

To more than one Longhorns player, it was proof Charles is ready for the big time.

Even at running back.

"He's just out there playing football," Carter said. "It doesn't matter if it's high school or college, he's a football player."

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