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UGA's Gates makes strong first impression

By Andy Johnston

For the AJC

ATHENS – Jeremy Williams had planned to be in Sanford Stadium for freshman Kenarious Gates' first start, but other obligations kept him from being there.

So Williams, the coach at Greenville High School, watched every snap of Georgia's game against Tennessee on TV, keeping his eyes on Gates, his former player.

"It was awesome," Williams said. "I really wanted to be there for that game. He played awesome."

Just five months removed from Greenville, Gates' rapid elevation to starter at right guard came to a surprise to almost everyone, even Williams, who has known Gates since he was in middle school. Georgia entered the season with one of the most experienced and highly touted offensive lines in the country, but after five games of mostly lackluster production and four losses, changes were made.

So Gates became the Bulldogs' third different starter at right guard this season, following Chris Davis, the incumbent who started the first two games, and Tanner Strickland, who started three. Left tackle Clint Boling was moved to right tackle and Trinton Sturdivant became the new starter at left tackle.

With the new line in place, Georgia scored on its first three possessions on its way to a 41-14 victory over Tennessee that snapped a four-game losing streak.

Coach Mark Richt and teammates said Gates, who is off-limits to the media this year, played well in his first action in what was shaping up to be a redshirt season. He was responsible for one of UT's two sacks of quarterback Aaron Murray, but Georgia is planning to start the same five players against Vanderbilt on Saturday.

"He's still a little bit raw right now," Boling said. "He's got a lot of potential. He's going to be a really good player one day. I think it helps him playing between [center] Ben [Jones] and I. We helped him with some calls and things like that. He's been coming along all camp and practice this season, so he's been doing really well."

Williams said Gates was a four-year starter on the offensive line and started the past two seasons on the defensive front at Greenville. He was one of the stars of last year's team that went 11-1 and lost to eventual state champ Wilcox County in the second round of the Class A playoffs.

Gates was recruited by several schools and committed to Kentucky. But when Georgia had a scholarship open up right before signing day, Gates went with the Bulldogs, who had been his first choice.

"We could tell he was a Division I player when he came into the program," Williams said. "He had the size, the work ethic and the grades. He's a high-character kid. We knew way back then."

Richt noticed Gates early in summer workouts, but said in August that he didn't think he would play as a freshman. At 6 feet 5 and 307 pounds, Richt said Gates could be moved to tackle in the future, but right guard is his home for now.

"They have a good player," Williams said. "If they didn't know that, now they do. He'll do whatever it takes to be a success."

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