

D-Line: Big players, big expectations

By Ashley Zeldin Daily Trojan

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Los Angeles, CA (CSTV U-WIRE) -- They aren't hyped as the third coming of the Wild Bunch, but Sedrick Ellis, Lawrence Jackson, Kyle Moore and Fili Moala very well could be.

"No doubt," defensive coordinator Nick Holt said.

"To be in the same category as those guys is an honor," Ellis said. "I hope we can live up to the way they played."

USC coach Pete Carroll was more guarded in his assessment.

"I never did own up to that then, and I'm not owning up to that now," Carroll said of Wild Bunch II and the prospect of Wild Bunch III.

Considering the 2003 incarnation of Shaun Cody, Omar Nazel, Mike Patterson and Kenechi Udeze, this year's front four may be the real deal.

"Our D-line is looking as big and fast as we have been," Ellis said.

Ellis and Jackson are tried-and-true veterans, having matured into consistent threats over their four years at USC.

Carroll sees the 6-5, 295-lb. Ellis as a role model.

"He's paid his dues, he's been through it all and he's on course to graduate," Carroll said. "He's a great personality - a symbol of the program.

"He's one of the best players, and he's getting recognition. He's getting rewarded for staying. He's maximized his experience, and when he gets that diploma, it'll be a great moment."

Ellis, who had 34 tackles, 8 for loss and 4.5 sacks, earned first-team All-Pac-10, first-team Collegefootballnews.com All-American honors and won the Morris Trophy, an award for the best defensive lineman in the Pac-10 as voted by offensive linemen.

"I don't play for attention. I just go out there and make my plays," Ellis said. "If attention comes, great. I'm an example of how things are supposed to be done, the Trojan way."

He can count on the attention, appearing on the watch lists for the 2007 Bednarik Award, Lombardi Trophy, Lott Trophy and Outland Trophy.

But it was Jackson, the 2005 sacks leader with 10, who received attention last year, as he didn't record a sack through seven games.

"He had opportunities early in the year. He could've easily had 10 to 12 sacks," Holt said.

Jackson sacked his critics, however, recording three at Stanford and another against Cal.

It didn't seem to matter that he led the unit with 43 tackles, 11 for loss, three deflections, two blocked field goals, an interception, a forced fumble and a fumble recovery.

"I was more productive last year than the year before," Jackson said. "I was a presence out there, but it was a humbling experience."

For his efforts, Jackson received USC's Defensive Lineman of the Year Award and All-Pac-10 second team honors. He's also on this year's Bednarik Award watch list and he's only getting better.

"I redefined my body this off-season to get myself more agile," Jackson said, who shed 15 lbs. and is listed as 6-5, 265 lbs.

But it is not just Jackson that is getting better; each member of the fearsome foursome has improved.

"Overall we're just a better unit than we were and we were pretty good last year," Holt said.

This includes, Moala, a junior, who cemented his place as a starter opposite Ellis despite spraining his ankle and missing spring drills. He earned Collegefootballnews.com Sophomore All-American and All-Pac-10 honorable mentions for his productive sophomore season.

"Players see by his effort and intensity that he's a frontline player," Carroll said. "He's playing like a first-teamer."

Moala filled in at nose tackle for Ellis in 2006, and worked his way onto the starting line for USC's last seven games, racking up 20 tackles, seven for loss, 2.5 sacks, four deflections and a fumble recovery.

"He came on strong at the end of the year. He's a good football player for a big kid," Holt said of the 6-5, 295-lb. Moala.

A sure bet for the other defensive end spot is the 6-7, 265-lb. Moore.

"This year I have to show I can produce," Moore said. "Last year's defense worked, but that's the OG (offensive guard) defense. This is what won the national championships. We're trying to establish that again."

Switching to the 4-3 will create more opportunities for the projected starters and probably for 6-3, 265 lb. freshman Everson Griffen.

Griffen garnered notoriety in fall camp for his spirited tussles with Moore.

"We had a little confrontation," Moore said. "It's like me and my little brother. I was just messing with him. It was nothing serious."

Besides Griffen, Holt tagged freshman tackle Christian Tupou to play this season.

"Physically, they're ready to go and mentally they're pretty sharp," Holt said.

"It shows a bright future for the D-line," Jackson added.

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