

Receivers heart, soul, hands of Gamecocks

staff writer JARED KELOWITZ

When looking at the Gamecocks' record this season, it's extremely easy to point out all their shortcomings. Trying to find positive aspects, however, is a lot tougher. One of USC's often overlooked bright spots are the wide receivers. Zola Davis, Jermale Kelly, Kerry Hood and Ben Fleming comprise what may be one of the country's most explosive receiving corps.

The Gamecock passing attack has accounted for a large portion of the total offense this season. Including last season, these four elusive players accounted for a total of 29 USC touchdowns and 2,839 yards of total receiving, proving to be a substantial part of the team's offense. This year, the quartet has accounted for 116 catches, 1,549 yards and 12 touchdowns.

The father figure and senior member of this quartet is Zola Davis. Davis' only goal is to help his team win as much as possible.

"If I have an outstanding game but the team is not winning, then I cannot say with a clear conscience that I am doing my job," Davis said. Davis wants to play in the NFL after graduation. If that doesn't work out, he sees himself receiving a sociology degree and entering the ministry.

"Playing in the NFL would be a dream come true, but that may not be what God calls me to do," he said. "I have to do whatever he calls me to do."

Through four seasons at USC, Davis compiled a number of impressive statistics which list him among the university's elite. Entering this season Davis needed to catch 54 more passes

to eclipse the school's mark set by former NFL Pro-Bowler Sterling Sharpe. He currently has 44 catches for 670 yards and five touchdowns.

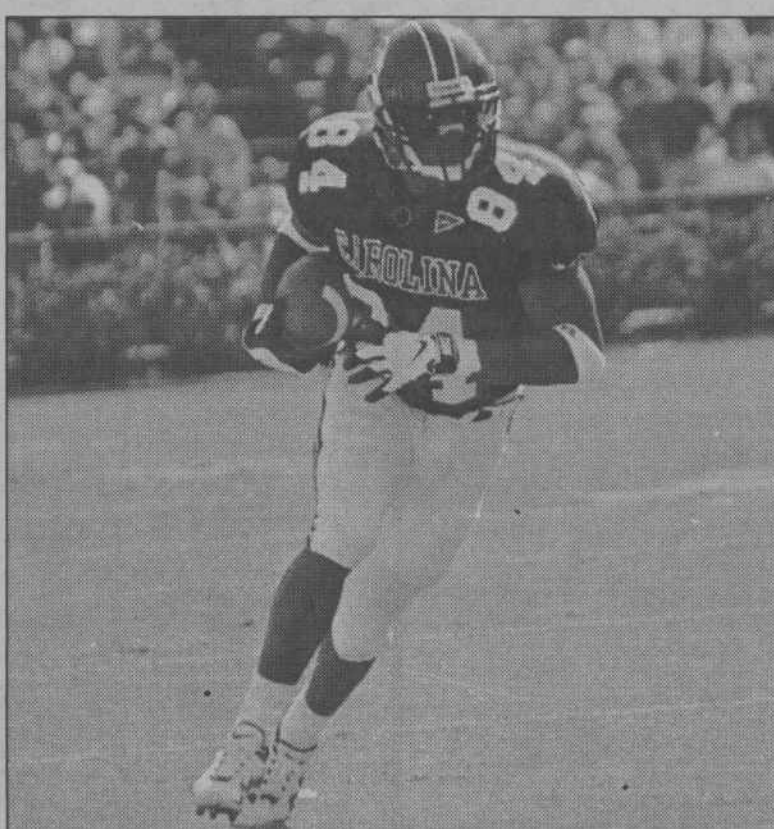
In 1995, Davis emerged as one of the top newcomers in the SEC. He led the Gamecocks in receiving yardage with 911 yards on 58 receptions.

That campaign, Davis also had career highs in touchdowns and receptions. He was named to the All-SEC freshman squad, not to mention as runner-up to Kevin Faulk for SEC freshman player of the year. Davis set USC freshman records in yards receiving (911), receptions (58) and touchdowns (9).

After his immediate success at the collegiate level, Davis' second season was a major letdown. He received a mere 24 passes, gained just 303 yards and scored only once, in 1996.

In his third season, Davis turned things around. In his first game of the '97 season, Davis caught 10 passes for 120 yards a little less than half of the receptions he accumulated the season before. By the end of this, his junior season, Davis was once again near the top of the team in receiving, finishing behind freshman phenom Jermale Kelly. In this, his junior season, Davis caught 34 passes for 407 yards and two touchdowns.

Success was nothing new for Davis after having an illustrious high school career at Charleston's Burke High School. In his senior season at Burke, he was named No. 1 receiver in the country by *Super Prep Magazine*. Other honors Davis received include being named to *Blue Chip Illustrated's* Dream Team, named South Carolina player of



SEAN RAYFORD Sports Photo Editor

Jermale Kelly has 37 catches for 443 yards and four TDs this year. He set the USC freshman record for TD receptions last year with 10.

the year by *Deep South Recruiting Guide*, a three-time All-State selection, and member of the Shrine Bowl squad.

Davis cites his family as his main source of inspiration. "They were always there for me because we were very closely-knit," Davis said.

Davis' advice to younger athletes who want to succeed on a college level is, "You got to believe in yourself and be dedicated to what you do."

Zola lives his life by the quote made famous by former N.C. State basketball coach Jim Valvano, "Don't ever give up."

"I had one or two rocky seasons, but I am here to make a contribution to the team, so I won't quit," Davis said.

Davis said his biggest thrill in sports was when the Gamecocks made their way to the Carquest Bowl in 1995.

Last year's No. 1 freshman receiver in the SEC, Jermale Kelly is the second piece of this quartet.

"My main goal is to help my teammates," he said. "The bottom line for me is winning."

Kelly centers his post-graduate plans on playing in the NFL, but if that doesn't work out, he sees himself in the insurance business.

"Whatever path I choose I would definitely like to start a family," Kelly said.

In Kelly's first season playing for South Carolina, he compiled some very impressive numbers. In his freshman campaign, Kelly caught a team-high 43 passes for 618 yards and 10 touchdowns. His 10 touchdown catches tied him for second in the SEC in that category last season. Those 10 times across the goal line also allowed Kelly to eclipse the school's freshman records held by Brandon Bennett and Zola Davis.

Kelly wasted no time scoring his first touchdown at USC. He did so against the University of Central Florida in the first college game he ever played. Some of Kelly's best games in 1997 include his team-best five receptions for 57 yards and two touchdowns against Vanderbilt, his two touchdown catches in the win over Arkansas, his two-touchdown performance to secure the victory over Kentucky, and his career-high nine receptions for 119 yards versus Mississippi State.

This year, Kelly has 37 catches for 443 yards and four touchdowns.

Like Davis, Jermale Kelly also had a remarkable high school career. Catching 68 passes for 1,154 yards and 10 touchdowns during his senior season earned him the honor of Mr. Football of South Carolina. Along with that, Kelly became the state's second all-time leading receiver with 187 receptions in his career. Other honors Kelly received include being named the No. 6 receiving prospect in the country by *Super Prep Magazine*, being named to the Nation's Top 100 squad, by *USA Today*, being rated the No. 2 prospect in the state, being named first team All-South by Sport South recruiting service, and having participated in the Shrine Bowl.

Kelly says his mother served as his source of inspiration as a kid and still does today. He offers this advice to younger athletes aspiring to play sports in college: "Always give your best effort; no matter what happens you can be proud of yourself."

Jermale subscribes to the philosophy that you must live every day of your life to the fullest. Catching his first-ever collegiate touchdown against the University of Central Florida sticks in his mind as his greatest thrill in sports.

The third member of this posse is junior Kerry Hood. His main goal this season was to catch every pass that came his way. By doing this, he feels he can really help his team. In five years or so, Hood sees himself as the proprietor of one or two small businesses.

"The most important part of my future plans is having a family," Hood said.

Hood lettered in 1995 as a true freshman on special teams and as a receiver. As a receiver he caught six passes for 58 yards. This season, Hood has 12 catches for 112 yards and two touchdowns.

Hood's biggest highlight his freshman season was when he ran a reverse for 30 yards against Louisiana Tech.

A broken foot kept Hood sidelined during his second season, but in his third season, as a sophomore, Hood improved tremendously, scoring a career-high six touchdowns. This statistic ranked him second on his team. Some of Hood's best performances include the game against Florida in which he caught the Gamecocks' first score of the game, the game against Georgia in which he caught a 41-yard touchdown pass and had four catches for 62 yards, and his two scores in the season opener against UCF.

Hood also had a distinguished high school career. He played wide receiver, quarterback and cornerback at Harper High School in Atlanta. He received such honors as an All-Southeast selection by *Blue Chip Illustrated*, two time all-city selection, and was ranked as one of the top 50 players in the state of Georgia. Growing up, Hood gained inspiration from his older brothers. To young athletes who want to succeed, Hood says, "Keep your head high regardless of what happens."

"I do not live my life by one quote, but rather by Christ," Hood said. "He's the one who strengthens me."

Hood's most thrilling moment as an athlete took place at his high school homecoming. In that game, as quarterback, Hood rushed for four touchdowns, including the game-winning score with 50 seconds left.

The final member of the quartet is junior Ben Fleming.

"My main goals this season are to catch everything that comes my way, improve everyday and just play hard," Fleming said. Fleming would love to play professional football, but if that doesn't pan out he sees himself in some branch of law enforcement, preferably the federal side.

Unlike his fellow wide receivers, Fleming is somewhat superstitious. He always listens to Master P and plays Tetris the night before a game on the road. In his first season at USC, in 1996, Fleming came on as a key reserve. His best game his freshman year was against Auburn when he caught three passes for 58 yards and a touchdown.

In his sophomore season, Fleming also played well against Auburn, this time catching three passes for 65 yards, his largest career output.

After 10 games this season, Fleming has 23 catches for 324 yards and one touchdown. His 14.1 yards-per-catch average for players with more than 10 catches is second on the team to Davis.

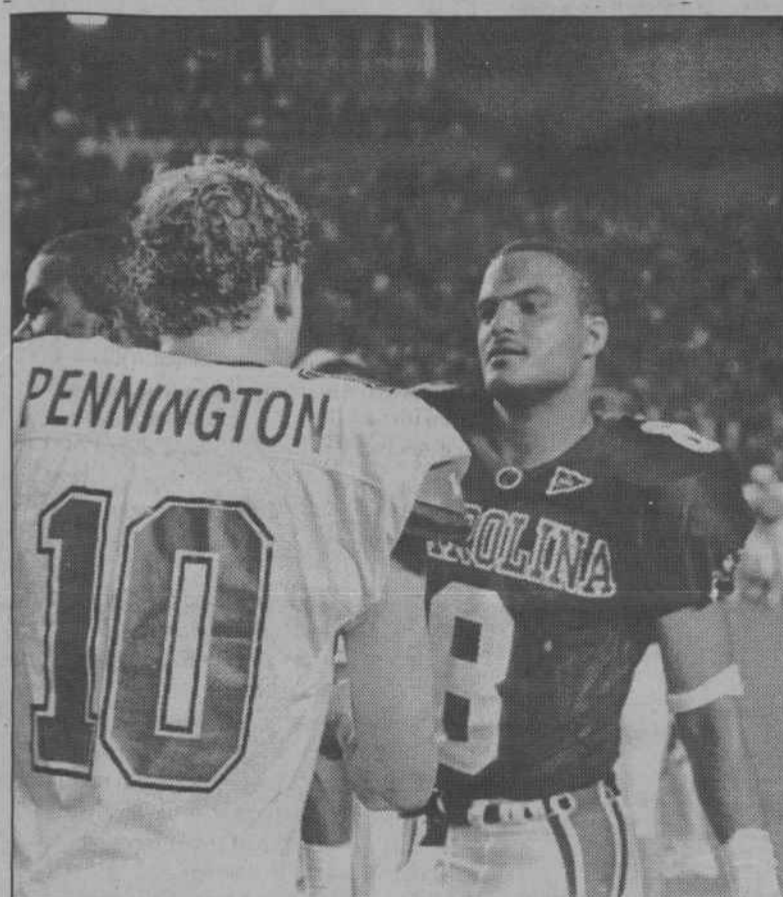
At Ribault High in Jacksonville, Fla., Fleming caught 60 passes for 1,028 yards and 10 touchdowns. These statistics earned him honors as a class 4-A, All-State selection and a spot on Florida's Super 75 Team.

Fleming says his main source of inspiration was his father, but the rest of his family also played a large part. Fleming offers this advice to younger athletes, "Follow your dreams and never stop working towards them."

Fleming lives his life by the quotation, "Failure to prepare, prepares you to fail."

Receiver Ben Fleming cites his first ever touchdown for USC as his most thrilling moment in sports. "It came my freshman season against Auburn, it was very exciting. Hopefully there will be more where that came from."

The quartet will have one final chance to put up big numbers, when they and the rest of the Gamecocks travel to Clemson Saturday.



SEAN RAYFORD Sports Photo Editor

Ben Fleming congratulates Marshall QB Chad Pennington after the Marshall game. Fleming has 23 receptions for 324 yards and one TD.



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Kerry Hood has 12 catches for 112 yards and two TDs this year.

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