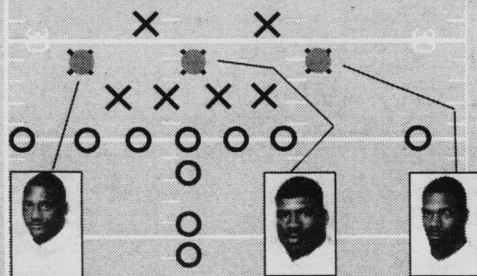


**LINEBACKERS**



James Hamilton, OLB      Kivuusama Mays, LB      Brian Simmons, OLB

# Linebackers face new challenge after breakthrough 1995 season

BY JOSEPH ROLISON  
SPORTSATURDAY EDITOR

A year ago, North Carolina's linebackers were a touchy subject.

The Tar Heels had just lost their top three linebackers to graduation, and with them went countless tackles, sacks and clutch stops. Left to fill the void were two sophomores and a junior, none of whom received much fanfare.

But not long into the season, those three unheralded replacements — juniors Brian Simmons and Kivuusama Mays and senior James Hamilton — blitzed into stardom. Based on their exploits last season, they are rated the top linebacking corps in the nation by The Sporting News.

Yet with the plaudits will come double teams. And triple teams. And offenses running plays in the other direction.

So Mays, Hamilton and Simmons face possibly the most difficult test of their careers — staying at the top.

"(The ranking) can put some pressure on you, but we tend not to talk about it," Mays said. "We feel like we did a lot of things last year to achieve that status, and we want to go out there and have fun."

The linebackers entertained themselves in '95 by chasing quarterbacks, stuffing running backs and disrupting offenses. No matter where opposing ball carriers roamed, they couldn't dodge Mays & Co.

And while speed accounted for much of the linebackers' success, it was defensive coordinator Carl Torbush's aggressive scheme that allowed them to roam recklessly.

"We had too much speed just to sit there and wait for the play to come to us," Mays said. "So Coach Torbush blitzed more and told us to let it loose."

So that's what each of the 'backers did. Mays punished ball carriers to the tune of 138 tackles, including 82 primary stops. He became a headhunter, tracking down runners and slamming them to the turf.

Simmons combined the roles of linebacker and defensive back. One moment he was stalking quarterbacks in the backfield. The next, he was in the secondary slapping away passes. At season's end, Simmons' combination of quickness and jumping ability resulted in 113

tackles and eight tipped passes.

"Linebackers have to be versatile," Simmons said. "It's not all about being able to hit — you've got to be quick enough to cover a receiver."

Ever since the unit's first start, Hamilton acted as the group's on-field coordinator. When something was awry, Hamilton usually set it straight.

And if a ball carrier managed to elude Mays or Simmons, Hamilton was there to dash his hopes.

"Simmons goes back and forth, back and forth — he's all over," Hamilton said. "K Mays isn't going to wait for anything, because he's always after the ball."

"I'm kind of in between them — I know where K is, I know where Brian is, and I get over and help them."

But now that the linebackers have emerged from the shadows, offenses will do everything to shut down the trio.

Torbush, however, doesn't have any special remedy for the double- and triple-teams. Instead, the linebackers will rely on what brought them to this point — natural ability and Torbush's tutoring.

"They have all the physical attributes we could ask for, and they have the intensity," Torbush said. "But we've always coached them really hard, and I still am coaching them hard."

"They haven't been treated like they're prima donnas."

Equally as important to the trio's success is its on-field communication. Off the field, the players' relationships are cordial. But on the field, good or bad, they don't hold anything back.

"We get along on and off the field," Mays said. "But on the field, if I mess up, (Simmons) is in my ear. And I do the same to him."

"We don't take it negatively — it's business when we're out there. But we do take it as constructive criticism."

So when the season kicks off, it will be back to business for the Tar Heel 'backers. Just like last year, they'll touch hands, take the field and set off on another mission — proving that it's no fluke; they really do comprise the best linebacking corps in the country.

"When the pressure's on, you tend to do things that you don't think you can," Mays said. "When it's time to produce, you just go. We're ready to go out and show people we deserve all the compliments we're getting."



Junior linebacker Kivuusama Mays (53) led UNC in tackles with 138 in 1995 and was named first-team all-ACC.

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