

## **Minnesota Daily**

### **Football: For U linebackers, three equals one**

By Marco LaNave

*Lee Campbell, Simoni Lawrence and Nate Triplett form one of Minnesota's best linebacker corps in recent memory.*

Published: 11/09/2009

In their first season at TCF Bank Stadium, the Gophers have had one of the greatest linebacker corps in team history.

Seniors Lee Campbell, Nate Triplett, and Simoni Lawrence are having career seasons, and each rank among the conference's top 20 tacklers, a claim no other Big Ten team can make.

"We're three guys that have really bought into the system ... our personalities click well," Campbell said. "We really work at being a good corps."

On Saturday, their journey with the Gophers will make its final stop in Minnesota against South Dakota State.

Each of the three has taken a different path to a season they hope ranks among the greatest for Minnesota defenses.

#### **The fiery veteran**

Campbell, a co-captain who has started 34 games over the past three seasons, has been described by Gophers head coach Tim Brewster as a "fiery middle linebacker."

Campbell said that quality comes from being raised by extroverted, outspoken parents.

Linebackers coach John Butler said that Campbell was born to play the game.

"He's got football inside of him — he's a great competitor," Butler said. "Doing things the right way and winning is important to him. Not a lot of people today ... in football and in life [have his] internal drive to be successful."

Campbell was recruited to play linebacker out of Gulf Coast High School (Fla.), where he was an undefeated state champion wrestler his senior year.

As a sophomore at Minnesota in 2007, he started every game at defensive end. Although it felt weird at first, Campbell said he picked up the position quickly and that it helped him develop more skills — such as beating blocks — that he could take back to the linebacker position before his junior season.

"It made me a more complete linebacker," Campbell said.

After leading the team with 80 tackles in 2008, he is third in the Big Ten and seventh in the country with 100 tackles this season. He has recorded a career-high 13 tackles four times this season, and he leads the conference with 59 solo tackles.

"I see Lee preparing and I'm like, 'Damn, he just had 13 tackles again, I better go prepare like he's doing,'" Lawrence said.

"I hope that, [from] the way I play, people enjoy watching me and that they can see the passion and the amount of energy that I have and the love that I have for this game," Campbell said.

#### **The playmaker**

In 2007, the Gophers suffered through their worst total defensive season in over 50 years, allowing nearly 520 yards per game.

Butler said there was a huge need for defensive playmakers after Minnesota limped to a 1-11 season.

So the Gophers brought in Lawrence, a two-time Seaboard Conference Player of the Year at Valley Forge Military Academy, to fulfill that role. Lawrence was a defensive back at Valley Forge, but he switched to linebacker upon arrival at Minnesota.

“It’s a different mindset; when you play defensive back, you want to look all pretty, and you don’t want to get into the dirty work,” Lawrence said. “Coach Butler quickly beat that out of me: ‘You’ve got to go and spill these 300-pound guards, I don’t care how much you weigh.’”

Despite entering the 2008 season as a 205-pound linebacker, Lawrence made a quick impact, forcing a fumble in the opener against Northern Illinois and returning an interception for a touchdown against Florida Atlantic on Sept. 20. He also returned a fumble for the Gophers’ final touchdown in a 27-20 victory at Illinois on Oct. 11.

In the last five games, however, his tackle numbers waned. Lawrence said his body was drained late in the year, which motivated him to get bigger and stronger in the offseason.

“Right now, I feel fresh because of the weight lifting,” said Lawrence, who weighed over 220 pounds at the beginning of the season.

He is third on the team with 68 tackles.

“He can run as fast as defensive backs and he hits like a truck,” Butler said.

### **The freak athlete**

When he came to Minnesota from Delano High School in the fall of 2005, Triplett was already a 6-foot-3, 230-pound linebacker. He has added 15 pounds since then.

“He’s as strong as an ox,” Lawrence said. “You can’t move Nate; he’s a freak with the way he lifts.”

Triplett waited the longest of the three for his first start, which came in the final home game of last season.

“Patience is always difficult, especially when I thought that I should have been playing more, but my coaches had a different plan,” Triplett said. “If the coaches think so, then that’s what I have to go with. I just did what I could and did it to the best of my abilities.”

As a sophomore and junior, Triplett found a role on special teams and as a backup linebacker. The last two seasons, he has earned the Bobby Bell Award, which goes to the team’s top special teams player.

Last spring, he played more with Campbell and Lawrence on the first-team defense. Triplett said that was when they started to gel as a group and click as a defense.

Despite the fewest starts of the three, Triplett was the quickest out of the gates this season.

In the opener at Syracuse on Sept. 5, Triplett made his second career start and set a career high with nine tackles and an end-zone interception in overtime.

The next week, in the opening game at TCF Bank Stadium, Triplett had 17 tackles, a pass breakup, two critical drive-stopping solo tackles and a 52-yard fumble recovery for the game-winning touchdown in the fourth quarter. That performance earned him weekly honors in the Big Ten and nationally.

Since then, he has had three games with at least 10 tackles.

Butler said there were earlier flashes of Triplett’s potential on special teams.

“Nate’s always had the ability,” Butler said. “He has all the characteristics that you need; it was just a matter of him believing in himself and then going out and doing it.”

### **NFL prospects**

Lawrence began getting noticed after his 2008 season.

“All of a sudden I started getting all these phone calls from different people, like, ‘Hey, do you need somebody to represent you? Do you need this, do you need that?’” Lawrence said. “I even had to change my phone number because it was getting a little hectic.”

Lawrence has the “highest ceiling” of the three Gophers linebackers, according to Steve Muench, an NFL draft and college football analyst for Scouts Inc., which analyzes college players’ draft potential and has been a part of ESPN’s draft coverage since 2006.

Muench, who has been evaluating the draft with Todd McShay since 2001, said he expects each of the three to get looks from NFL teams.

Before the season, all three were rated as “fringe draft picks” — likely to be late-round picks or possible rookie free-agent signees, Muench said. Scouts Inc. will re-evaluate draftees in February.

Both Triplett and Campbell, whom Muench said he could see as special teams and backup players, said they have heard more buzz about their professional prospects since the season began.

In watching film from games against Ohio State and California, Muench said all three had sound technique and were well-coached. He said they recognized plays, located the ball quickly and took good pursuit angles to sound tackles.

A Gopher linebacker has not been drafted since Craig Sauer was taken by Atlanta in the sixth round 1996. If all three seniors are selected next April, it would be the first time that three Minnesota linebackers have been drafted in the first seven rounds (the draft had 12 rounds through 1992, and had 8 rounds in 1993) since 1978, when Mark Merrill, Mike Hunt and Steve Stewart were all taken in the second round.

### **Leaving a legacy**

While the three senior linebackers have been focused on having a great final season, Butler said they have also tried to show the younger players how they achieved their success.

“Hopefully the younger guys see that it’s nothing that’s ever given — it’s something that’s always earned,” Butler said.

Redshirt freshman Keanon Cooper, who leads all bench players in tackles, has played the most behind the seniors, sometimes with all of them in a four-linebacker defense.

A weak-side linebacker like Triplett, Cooper said he watches and tries to replicate the senior. He said that he can see himself being similar athletically and physically to Lawrence, and he wants to achieve Campbell’s level of rapid comprehension.

“All those guys catch on to a defense real quick, and all we have to do is look at exactly what they’re doing,” Cooper said.

Lawrence said the younger linebackers, such as Cooper and sophomore Gary Tinsley, are going to be great from learning what they need to be successful.

“Minnesota hasn’t been really known for its defense in recent years,” Campbell said. “Hopefully we start changing that — this year and within the coming years. Hopefully, they’re going to say, ‘Minnesota’s a great defense and has great linebackers.’”