Senior A-back Roddy Jones has been nominated for the 2011 Allstate AFCA Good Works Team.

By Alex Mitchell
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Last season, the Tech football team decided to switch to an entirely new defensive scheme and hired a new staff of coaches in hopes of not repeating 2009’s defensive woes. Statistically, the move to the 3-4 defense seemed to backfire in 2010, resulting in Tech opponents scoring more points per game and averaging over 11 yards more in each contest.

The defense should be better and more experienced in the 3-4 system this year as it will be the second full season under defensive coordinator Al Groh. As the 2010 season progressed, improvement could be seen on the defensive side of the ball. The 2010 defense’s best performance came in the bowl game against Air Force, which only scored 14 points. However, Tech’s defense only returns five starters and has to replace the entire secondary.

There is still some room for optimism though, as Tech has three huge returning players from last year’s squad that collectively weigh in at over 800 lbs. Tech returns its entire defensive line from a season ago and the unit enters 2011 with some lofty expectations.

“One of our goals on the defensive line [this season],” said redshirt senior defensive end Jason Peters. “Peters may be on to something, as the defensive line this season boasts two starting seniors in Peters and nose tackle Logan Walls.

“When Logan wins, we win… He controls both A gap and B gap. It is such an important spot because if a team can run the ball in either of those two gaps then we will have a lot of problems. He is extremely disruptive,” Peters said.

Walls and Peters flourished in year one of the 3-4 system and combined for 25 more tackles in 2010 than they did the previous season. That was even in a defense that was completely new to both players, after being recruited to play in the 4-3 system.

The two seniors learned the 3-4 quickly and now are charged with the task of leading by example this season as they are projected to be Tech’s only senior starters on the defensive side of the ball.

“I take the responsibility [for the defense] this year because at this point, I feel like it is now or never. It is the most important season to me because I have put five years into the program now. I feel as though I am in a good position to help other guys learn and lead the team… I want to find a way to make people better,” Peters said.

It is not only Peters and Walls that will make this year’s defensive line a strong asset. Junior defensive end Izaan Cross will start the season on the opposite side of Peters in the fall, and has the potential to be the best player on the entire defense. Cross recorded 6.5 tackles for loss and broke up four passes last season.

“Izaan is one of the best athletes that we have as far as strength, size and all around competitiveness. He is going to beat you on the first play and he is going to beat you on the last play. He plays the type of defense that coach Groh wants us to play: hard-nosed defense,” Peters said.

As good as Peters, Walls and Cross have been in their Tech careers, they might actually have to watch their backs this season as Tech also has a surplus of talented defensive linemen who could compete for playing time.

The biggest backup on the team is six-foot-seven, 333-pound redshirt junior defensive tackle T.J. Barnes. Barnes will step in for Walls on some running downs and will be a staple in Tech’s goal line and short-yardage units.

A pair of redshirt sophomores rush ends will backup Peters and Cross this season. Both Euclid Cummings and Emmanual Dieke are homegrown players and are built in the same mold as Cross. Both will need to gain some weight to be successful in 3-4 defense, but they figure to provide some support in passing downs.

Peters said he does not worry about a younger player taking some of his snaps, and instead he looks forward to having solid players available to play behind him.

Emmanuel is one of the most athletic and physically built players on our team. He is learning how to make plays on a college level and he is going to be a huge contributor to this team along with Euclid. We know that we are going to need people to rotate in, so it is not going to be a situation where [Logan or I am] going to have to go the entire game,” Peters said.

At the end of the day, the Tech defensive line has all the tools to succeed—seniors that have years of experience, a budding superstar to go along with them and a handful of talented backups who can be inserted at any time for a mismatch.

As with any position, injuries and player development will have a lot of impact on the way the line plays this year. Even if they do not reach their goal of being the best line in the ACC, Peters, Walls, Cross and company will cause plenty of problems for opponents.