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Charles is a freshman, but he doesn't play like one

By Pat Forde
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He has been so successful, so fast. So smooth. So skilled. So prepared. So precocious. Texas freshman running back Jamaal Charles has walked into college football and played as though his birth certificate is as bogus as Nigerian spam e-mail.

Clearly, nothing about the college game has rattled the 18-year-old from Port Arthur, Texas. Right, Jamaal?

The answer you hear is a short, shy laugh.

Time for Charles to let Gridworld in on his little secret. Time for him to tell you about the first time he reported to the Longhorns' huddle Sept. 10 in the Horseshoe at Ohio State, surrounded by 100,000 buck-nutty opposing fans and a national TV audience.

This just in: You're not at Memorial High School anymore, kid.

"My body was shaking like it was cold outside," Charles admitted. "I was hoping they weren't looking at me in the huddle because I'm shaking like it's 1 degree. I didn't want them to think I was panicking.

Jamaal Charles

"I just said to myself, 'Let me get my first touch and I won't be scared no more.'"

His first touch was a hand-off that produced a first down. That banished the shakes from Charles' 6-foot-1, 190-pound body. Shortly thereafter, the shakes transferred to the defenders in scarlet and gray -- and have stayed with every defense that has tried futilely to contain No. 25 in burnt orange.



Charles' second touch against the Buckeyes was an 11-yard reception, and the third pushed Texas inside the Ohio State 10-yard line on its way to its first touchdown. His fourth was a 36-yard reception that set up a field goal right before halftime.

Jamaal Charles leads the Horns in rushing and is second in receiving.

By the fourth quarter, Charles was comfortable enough to help the Horns pull out their biggest regular-season win under Mack Brown.

Trailing 22-16 with 4:42 left and facing a third-and-6 from the Ohio State 48, quarterback Vince Young looked the freshman's way. Charles sprinted out of the backfield, eluded coverage from the Buckeyes' blue-chip linebacking corps and caught an 8-yard pass to keep the drive alive. A few plays later, Young threw the winning touchdown pass.

For the game, Charles produced 26 rushing yards and 69 receiving. It's his lowest all-purpose yardage total in four games this year, but it's pretty good against Ohio State -- especially for a guy who started the game trembling like a San Andreas seismograph needle.

"When I was a freshman, I knew I couldn't have done it like he did," said Young, who certainly has never lacked self-confidence. "People were saying how loud it was and what a big catch he made. That's just incredible for a freshman to come in and play like that."

Said Brown: "He's embraced the major stage. He went to Ohio State and acted like he had been there before."

Next stop for Charles in Charge is Dallas on Saturday. If he can pull off the same remarkable impersonation of a veteran against Mack's daddy, Oklahoma, Charles might have reporters running a Danny Almonte-style background check on his age.

Heading into the Red River showdown that could spring Texas toward the national championship game, Charles is the most productive offensive Longhorn not named Vince Young. He not only leads the team in rushing and is second in receptions but is ahead of most everyone nationwide, too.

Charles ranks 15th nationally in rushing and 27th in all-purpose yardage (and he doesn't return kicks). Among the nation's leading 100 rushers, only Arkansas State's Antonio Warren and USC's Reggie Bush are averaging more than Charles' 8.1 yards per carry. Among all-purpose running backs with no kick-return yardage, Warren's 8.9 yards per touch is the only average better than Charles' 8.8.

He has the speed and nimble feet of a track star -- as a high school senior, Charles had the fastest times in the nation in the 110-meter and 300-meter hurdles. But he can do more than just run away from the defense: By Texas' calculation, 41.2 percent of the young star's yards have come after contact.

Those numbers don't just stand out in comparison with his contemporaries. They even stand out when measured against Texas' ridiculously high historical standards.

No freshman ever ran for more yards in his debut than Charles' 135 against Louisiana-Lafayette. His 189 yards against Rice was the second-highest freshman single-game total in school history. And his rushing total through four games -- 447 yards -- is the best for a Texas freshman at that stage of his career.

That productivity, and junior Selvin Young's perpetual fragility, will make Charles a major factor Saturday. That, in and of itself, shows how good he is -- and might show how much Brown is willing to change his approach to the one game he cannot seem to win.

In a 2001 upset loss to Oklahoma, Brown gave freshman Cedric Benson exactly one play against the Sooners -- a quarterback sneak by Chris Simms. Instead of plugging Benson's talent into the lineup in a major rivalry game, he played it safe with largely forgettable Ivan Williams.

Texas scored three points that day in its second of five straight losses to the Sooners.

There should be no holding back with Charles on Saturday. Brown seems significantly less gripped by Red River tension than in the past, in part thanks to this freshman's ability.

"We're really, really impressed with his football savvy at such an early age," Brown said.

This would seem an appropriate place to slap a restrictor plate on the hype. It should be noted that the previous Texas record holder for most freshman yards in four games was a Mr. Graylon Wyatt, in 1974. Wyatt faded from view sometime thereafter, eclipsed by a classmate named Earl Campbell.

So four games does not guarantee superstardom -- especially when a Bob Stoops defense is next on the agenda. But it's the rest of the Jamaal Charles package -- the stuff beyond the stat sheet, the stuff that stands out on coaches' film -- that has endeared him to his coaches so quickly.

"The thing that's amazed us was not his ability, because we could see that, but how he's handled the transition to college football," Brown said. " ... The two things that are most difficult for freshman stars at running back are, number one, ball security, and he's done a good job with that. They will be hit a lot more aggressively than they were in high school, and that scares you. Secondly is their ability to pick up the blitz and to block. Most of them didn't block.

"He's done a tremendous job with both of those aspects, so he's much more mature as a football player than we anticipated he would be at this stage."

How well has he done? Try zero fumbles, zero dropped passes and zero blown assignments in pass protection. (Nothing will endear a freshman running back to his Heisman Trophy-candidate quarterback faster than laying a solid block on a blitzing linebacker.)

All those zeros in the negative categories ... Charles probably wakes up with his hair perfect and his breath minty-fresh, too.

After rushing for more than 4,000 yards and 50 touchdowns his last two years of high school -- despite missing games because of injury -- the Parade All-American was ready to leave Port Arthur for Austin. He enrolled at Texas at the beginning of the summer and dove into workouts, increasing his strength -- and his chances for playing right away.

"We didn't know actually how good he was [during the summer]," linebacker Aaron Harris said. "We saw him in the high school all-star games, and you know how those games go. Then when he started at practice, we realized that he was the next guy to take our program to where we wanted to go."

Said Charles of his August mind-set: "If I'm coming out of high school and playing at Texas, I feel like I should play like an All-American."

That's a rare bold statement for a kid with a soft, high-pitched voice and painstaking politeness. Ask him a question and the most frequent answer is a lilting "Yesirrrrrr."

Soft aura aside, Charles was toughened up as a kid by his three older brothers -- one of whom, ShanDerric, set freshman rushing records at SMU. And he grew up scarred by Texas' repeated losses to Oklahoma.

"I committed to them as a junior," Charles said. "I'm from Texas. I wasn't going to go for OU. I'd be watching them like, 'Dang, man, Texas lost again to OU.'"

Now, he is prominently positioned to do something about that losing streak. Just check the precocious kid for shaking hands in that first huddle.

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