

A Veteran Newcomer

Junior college transfer brings maturity to receiving corps

By Chip Cosby
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Aaron Boone felt a little funny as he prepared to have his picture taken for the University of Kentucky football media guide.

As UK's only junior-college transfer, he was thrown in with the freshman class.

The thing is, Boone is 23. In a group of baby-faced 17- and 18-year-olds, Boone and his 5 o'clock shadow stood out like a sore thumb.

``It was kind of weird,'' Boone said. ``I looked around and thought to myself, `These guys were in seventh grade when I graduated from high school.' ''

Boone, a wide receiver who earned junior-college All-America honors last season, has been around the block. After graduating from Millard High School in Fillmore, Utah, in 1996, he was redshirted his first year at Snow College. Then he went on a two-year Mormon mission before returning to play for the junior college in Ephraim, Utah, in 1999 and 2000.

That well-traveled road could prove to be an advantage for Boone. A self-proclaimed late bloomer, he's had time to grow into his 6-foot-3, 205-pound frame.

``That maturity definitely helps,'' Boone said. ``I think about how I was in high school and how I am now, and it's like two different worlds.''

Boone, who is one of the bigger receivers on the UK roster, is expected to provide an over-the-middle threat. He had a solid spring before a hamstring injury kept him out of the last week of practice and the spring game.

``It was tough because I felt like I was just starting to make things happen,'' Boone said.

He shook off the injury and has picked up right where he left off in the spring. His hands have been as consistent as any among the UK wideouts.

With a 40-yard-dash time of 4.6 seconds, Boone is not a burner. But UK Coach Guy Morriss said Boone's attitude and precise route-running are what separate him from the pack.

``Aaron is a guy that wants the football; he's got a lot of courage,'' Morriss said. ``He's got decent speed, but I think he understands that he's got to be a good route-runner to get himself open. You've got the speedsters who think they can beat everybody with their speed, and you just don't do it that way. The first thing you've got to do is learn to run routes.''

But if Boone had his druthers early in his career, he might instead be battling Jared Lorenzen for the quarterback spot. He grew up a huge Brigham Young fan and wanted to follow in the footsteps of famous Cougars quarterbacks Steve Young, Jim McMahon and Ty Detmer.

Boone was recruited to Snow as a quarterback and spent his redshirt year running the scout team. He returned from his mission in 1999 with hopes of replacing Josh Heupel, the previous Snow starter who had moved on to Oklahoma.

But after the coaching staff told Boone he would be no better than a backup quarterback, he hesitantly agreed to give receiver a try.

On his first play in his first game as a receiver, he caught a 60-yard touchdown on a halfback pass.

``I resisted moving to receiver at first,'' he said. ``But after I caught that touchdown I thought, `Maybe this isn't so bad.' ''

Boone went on to finish 1999 with 33 catches for 645 yards and six touchdowns. He followed that with 81 receptions for 1,505 yards and 19 touchdowns last season.

And while Boone has spent only two years as a receiver, he said his experience as a quarterback helped him learn the ropes quickly.

``It helps you have a little better understanding of what you're looking for,'' he said. ``Most younger guys don't know the difference between a cover-2 and cloud (defenses), and it also helps when you're making your reads and trying to find pockets to sit in.''

Receivers coach Harold Jackson already envisions Boone making tough grabs in traffic.

``He can be a weapon in the red zone because he can bang in there and bounce off defensive backs,'' Jackson said.

But Jackson stopped short of labeling Boone strictly a possession receiver.

``I'd say he's kind of in between a possession receiver and a deep-threat guy,'' Jackson said. ``He doesn't have great speed, but he has enough to keep defenses honest.''

Boone has proven he's not afraid to take on linebackers to make a grab over the middle.

``Why be scared?'' he said. ``I weigh as much as some of the linebackers. That's the advantage of being a big receiver.''