

Marcus In the Middle

Jaguars' Second-Year Defensive Tackle Takes Center Stage

Marcus Stroud wasn't an every-down player for the Jacksonville Jaguars as a rookie last season. It's understandable considering that he was playing behind Pro Bowl tackle Gary Walker and veteran Seth Payne in a defensive scheme that rotates linemen on almost every play.

Things changed for Stroud during the offseason. Walker and Payne were selected by Houston in the expansion draft, leaving the former first-round draft pick from Georgia as the most experienced lineman on the Jaguars' roster. Stroud took it upon himself to step up as he prepared for the 2002 season.

"People expect a lot out of first-round draft picks, and they should," Stroud says. "I learned a lot last season, but Jacksonville has put a lot of faith in me and now it's time for me to step up to the next level."

Because the Jaguars rotate defensive linemen to keep them fresh in the hot and humid Florida weather, Stroud played barely half the defensive snaps last season. Initially, that frustrated Stroud.

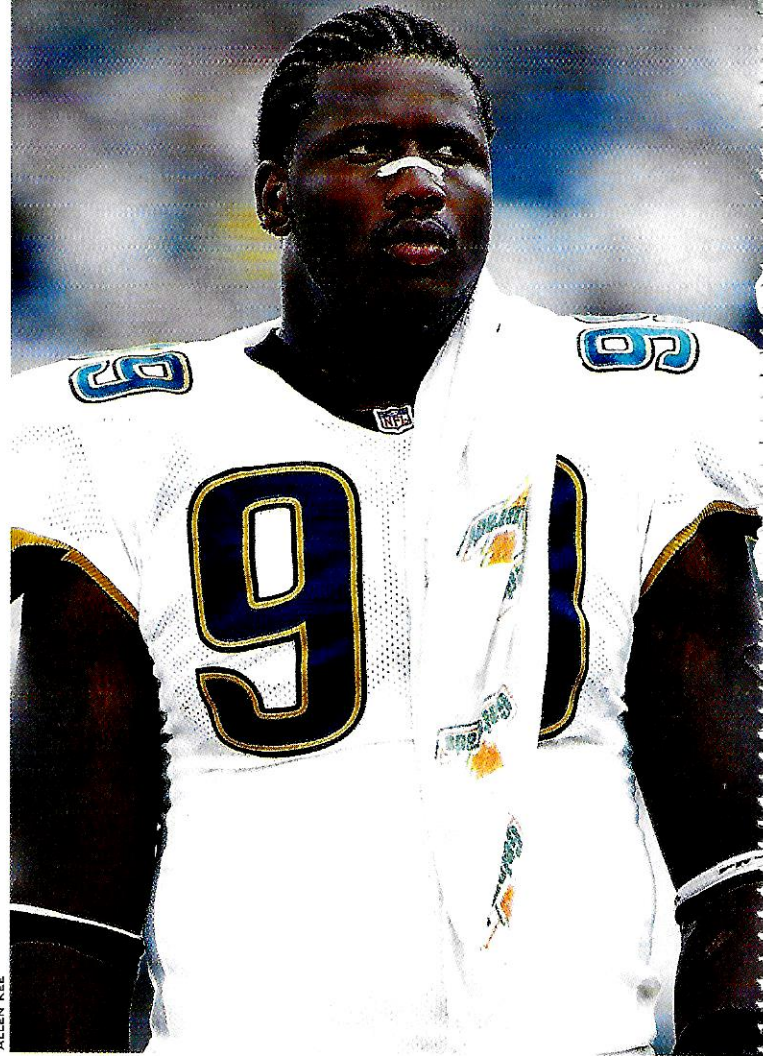
"Everyone wants to go out there and play every down," he says. "It took me a while to adjust to the system. As much as I wanted to be out there all the time, I realized I was young and had a lot to learn."

Jaguars defensive coordinator John Pease watched Stroud learn and mature during his rookie season.

"No one comes in and makes an immediate impact," Pease says. "He's learned the nuances of the game that you don't pick up until you've played a few downs."

"We've always got fresh linemen in the game who are strong against the run or the pass. We teach them to play either side, so offensive linemen aren't able to key on one player. Also, the [rotation] plan is good for practice because the guys always know that they are going to get into the game come Sunday."

Preparing for the 2002 campaign, Stroud welcomed the pressure of increased expectations.



ALLEN KEE

BY SCOTT JONES

"Disruptive" describes 6-foot 6-inch, 322-pound MARCUS STROUD, who wreaked havoc on opponents' field-goal attempts in 2001.

"You're always under pressure," he said. "Someone is always sneaking up on you, and you're looking over your shoulder. I like the pressure—for me it's positive pressure."

"He knows we are looking to him this season," Pease said. "He's a self-motivated player, and we don't have to tell him he has to get ready."

It didn't bother Stroud that Jacksonville made Tennessee tackle John Henderson its first-round draft choice in 2002.

"He's a talented player who will contribute a lot to our defensive unit," Stroud said prior to the season. "I look forward to playing alongside him."

Last season, the 6-foot 6-inch, 322-pound Stroud recorded the Jaguars' first blocked field goal in four seasons. Pease claims Stroud's size and presence on special teams also contributed to several other missed field goals by opponents. Pease recalls one game in which Stroud's athletic ability and speed were especially evident.

"He ran down [former Georgia teammate] Hines Ward in Pittsburgh, and it was a sight to see this big lineman closing in on a little receiver," Pease says. "He's got great speed, and he's only going to get better."

After an offseason that included full participation in the Jaguars' rigorous conditioning and weight-training program, Stroud entered 2002 ready to roll. His goal?

"I want to go out there and contribute on every play," Stroud said. "I also want to get more sacks to go with a lot of tackles." ■