Tech's Agemy was 'educated' to be a tackler

By John Packett
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As a redshirt freshman for Virginia Tech last season, Jamel Agemy spent a lot of time on the scout team, helping the Hokies prepare for the next team on the schedule. He also learned much about playing linebacker from Mike Johnson, the club's leading tackler.

Last Saturday night against Wake Forest, Agemy put some of his education to work when he helped the Hokies edge the Deacons 21-20 in the season opener. With Johnson having finished his tour with the Hokies, Agemy was able to earn a spot in the starting lineup.

The inside linebacker in Tech's defensive scheme finished the game with 13 tackles, the second-highest total on the club. That's not bad for someone who had never played a down in college and admitted he was "scared as hell" before the game.

"It was the first time I'd ever been out there," said Agemy. "I was really nervous. I didn't want to mess up. I wanted the team to win and I wanted to play well. But it was more important for us to win ... than for me to have a good game.

"In the first half, I thought we played pretty well. We were controlling them. We let up and they controlled the game in the second half. But we did what we had to do to win the game. We could have played a lot better. We made some mistakes, but it was the first game, and, hopefully, we got them ironed out."

Agemy, whose parents are from Lebanon and live in Hollywood, Fla., figures he owes much to Johnson, who played professionally with the Philadelphia Stars this year. The Stars, with Johnson playing a backup role, won the United States Football League championship.

"We're really good friends," said Agemy, "I picked up a heckuva lot of things from him. One of the things he taught me was mental toughness. A lot of times he would come to the sidelines really exhausted late in the game. But he would go right back in ... like he wasn't tired.

"It was like that Saturday [against Wake]. I was really tired, but there was no way I was going to quit."

Because Johnson and fellow linebacker James Robinson took seven years of experience when they left, there was bound to be pressure on whoever took over at those positions. Sophomore Paul Nelson is starting at the outside linebacker.

"There's a lot of pressure on all of us," said Agemy. "We were 9-2 and we had the best [scoring and rushing] defense in the country. In the first half, I think we withstood the pressure, but in the second half, we made some mistakes. You can't make mistakes and win. We were lucky to pull it off.

"Replacing a guy like Johnson isn't easy. He was smart ... like having a defensive coordinator on the field. And Robinson was just as good. He was a great linebacker. Paul's doing a very good job taking his place. They were both great linebackers. The experience they had meant so much.

"He [Johnson] was bigger than me, faster than me. If I can fill his shoes, I will have accomplished a lot."

Agemy realizes he has a long way to go before he can reach the level attained by Johnson.

"I had some trouble with my tackling," admitted the 5-11 1/4, 208-pounder. "I had a couple of missed tackles [against Wake]. I've been working on it all week. [Linebacker] coach [Dick] Biddle has worked me in tackling drills. I'm working on my pass drops, too. I still get nervous and make mental mistakes."

Agemy and the Hokies know they can't make many mistakes this afternoon (12:20 kickoff) in Blacksburg and expect to beat West Virginia (2-0). The Mountaineers have outscored their first two opponents 68-6 and have claimed the last three games between the teams.

"Until I understand fully what's going on," said Agemy, "I'll still be nervous before games. I know I'll be nervous [today]. They've got a great club and they're well-coached. I feel like I'm getting better every day. I'm learning more and more about the defense and more about myself."