

THE INDEX-JOURNAL

Sports

EHS Senior Flourishes at Linebacker

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Published: Thursday, October 2, 2008 12:32 AM EDT



Emerald's A.J. Jones (24) is a starter at linebacker, but Jones also plays wide receiver and running back for the 1-4 Vikings, who host Pendleton this Friday. (Staff photo by T.M. James)

There haven't been many benefits to the Emerald High School football team's plethora of injuries this year, but if anything, the injuries have potentially set senior A.J. Jones up for his future playing career.

An oversized safety throughout his first three years with the Vikings, Jones has played the first half of Emerald's season at linebacker in an effort to provide experience in an area where he's most needed.

At 5-foot-11, 207 pounds, Jones will likely play linebacker in

college if he receives an offer, and he's already proven adept at the role midway through the regular season. "His biggest attribute is his size and his speed," Emerald coach Mike Clowney said. "I think he's going to be a linebacker in college, so it's just a good transition for him to go ahead and start playing there now."

Jones, who has already received attention from Furman and Wofford, has a team-high 43 tackles on the season and a fumble recovery. The speed that was such an asset as a defensive back has also carried over to his new position. "One skill I guess is speed because at DB, you need a lot of speed. That's one advantage that I have," Jones said. "Knowing that I was

a big safety, too, I fit well at linebacker.”

Jones, along with fellow senior E.J. Wright, were moved to linebacker before the season when it became clear senior linebacker Taylor Johnson would be out indefinitely with a knee injury.

The change left the Vikings with little experience in the secondary, but considering most of Emerald’s opponents have run-based offenses, it was a gamble Clowney was willing to take. “The thing that happened with playing him there is that it probably leaves us zero experience in the secondary,” Clowney said. “I think we’ve got a group of guys (in the secondary) who are still working to get things done the way we need them to, (but) looking in the preseason at the majority of teams we play, they primarily run the ball.”

With Johnson and senior linemen Rashad Robinson and Nick Brinson out of commission, Jones has quickly become one of the Vikings’ most visible and called-upon players. “At first it’s been kind of hard, but coach (Clowney) like always says, You’ve got to have a short memory,” Jones said. “We’ve just got to adjust our attitude to play with the people we have and trust them. “I feel like it’s an opportunity for me to step up and be a leader. People are looking up to me, so I guess need to step up.”

Switching to linebacker has also forced him to become much more of aware of what’s going on around him on the other side of the line. “At defensive back, you really see a lot better and you really don’t have to read as much as you do at linebacker. At linebacker, you have to read your linemen and stay focused on the backs and everything,” Jones said. “ At safety, I could look at the linemen, but I would basically read receivers. I could see everything happening because I was so far back.”

Jones’ increased exposure at linebacker also means he’ll have more opportunities to make college coaches notice his play. “I believe it’s kind of inspired me to play better and practice harder,” Jones said. “I just try to be more of leader because that’s what teams are looking at.”