

No escaping Olajubutu

Sure-tackling linebacker uses wrestling techniques to bring down foes

BY BOB HOLT ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

ORLANDO, Fla. — If Sam Olajubutu hadn't become an All-SEC linebacker at Arkansas, he probably could have been a standout college wrestler.

"He's without a doubt one of the best wrestlers I've ever coached, and I've coached several state champions," said Jeff Sharp, who coached Olajubutu at LaGrange (Ga.) High School. "I'm sure he could have [wrestled] in college if that's what he'd chosen to do."

Sharp, who is now coaching at Carrollton (Ga.) High School, recalled that Olajubutu once had a practice match against a scholarship college wrestler whose coach wanted him to get a workout in the summer.

"Sam wore that kid out," Sharp said. "It wasn't even close."

Olajubutu, 5-9, wasn't among the state champions Sharp coached, but he won two area titles and finished third in the state his junior year in the 189-pound class and third again as a senior in the 215-pound class.

"I think I could have wrestled in college," said Olajubutu, a fifth-year senior who will lead Arkansas' defense against Wisconsin in the Capital One Bowl on Monday. "But I wanted to concentrate on football, and everybody knew that, so I really didn't get recruited [as a wrestler]."

Olajubutu began wrestling in the seventh grade, and for the next several years that was his winter sport after the football season.

Wrestling was a good way for him to stay in shape for football, and he liked the sport's competitive nature and reliance on intellect as well as athleticism.

"You've got to use a lot of different techniques, and you've also got to use your brain a lot," Olajubutu said. "I was smart, and I was stronger and faster than a lot of people."

Olajubutu said the wrestling moves he learned, including leverage and takedown techniques, have been helpful as a college football player. He leads the Razorbacks with 112 tackles this season and his 369 career stops rank third on Arkansas' all-time list behind Tony Bua (408) and Ken Hamlin (381).

"Tackling is just taking a man down, and that's what wrestling teaches you to do," Olajubutu said. "You learn about staying low and keeping your body in the right position."

Steve Pardue, LaGrange's football coach for the past 14 seasons, said Olajubutu is the best tackler he's had, a significant statement considering the program has produced many college players, including six on teams playing in bowl games this year.

Other former LaGrange players now on SEC teams are Auburn linebacker Tray Blackmon, Kentucky linebackers Wesley Woodyard and Braxton Kelly and South Carolina quarterback Blake Mitchell.

"We've been fortunate to have a lot of good players come through here, but one thing that separates Sam from them all is what a good tackler he was," Pardue said. "Sam never missed a tackle."

"He's got a great gift for tackling with his combination of speed, power and leverage."

When people talk about Olajubutu, "leverage" is a word that comes up frequently because of his wrestling background.

"I think wrestling is one of the toughest sports as far as training and conditioning and competitiveness," said Arkansas defensive coordinator Reggie Herring, who also coaches linebackers. "It's nonstop, you can never quit, and that's what you want from your football players, too."

"It mirrors football in that you're using your hands, you're using your body for leverage, and it's a fight for the whole time you're on the mat. There's a lot of intensity."

When Herring came to Arkansas in January of 2005, he wasn't impressed with Olajubutu's intensity or conditioning during winter drills.

Olajubutu started 16 games as a freshman and sophomore in 2003 and 2004, but the following spring found himself on the third-team defense and deep in Herring's doghouse.

"I was really not impressed he was a starter and was at the back of the line, throwing up, couldn't get through the drills," Herring said. "Really, by my standards, it was pitiful what he was doing."

"Sam needed some waking up, and so did the whole defense. That's what they hired me to do —

wake up this defense."

Olajubutu was fully awake by the end of spring practice in 2005, when he earned back his starting job. Herring has praised his attitude, commitment and play ever since and called Olajubutu the heart and soul of Arkansas' defense.

"Every coach's dream is to coach a guy like Sam, because he's bought into what we've been trying to sell and teach, and not every player will do that," Herring said. "He had some talent, and he was willing to meet me halfway, and it takes a special kid to be able to listen and do what he's told."

Arkansas offensive line coach Mike Markuson, who recruited Olajubutu, credited Herring with helping Olajubutu reach his potential.

"I think Reggie Herring is the best thing that ever happened to Sam," Markuson said. "He's a hard-nosed coach, and I don't know if Sam was getting the most out of his potential.

"Reggie, early on, was really down on him. But Reggie's molded him into the kind of player Sam has become. Sam had it in him, and Reggie got it out of him."

After watching Olajubutu on tape and in practice at LaGrange, Markuson liked what he saw but wondered what Arkansas' other coaches would think about recruiting a 5-9 linebacker.

"A pretty strong consensus from the coaches was, 'This guy's a football player, let's go get him,' " Markuson said. "I'm glad we did."

Markuson also watched Olajubutu in wrestling practice and was impressed by his toughness.

"I like wrestlers because they use everything they have," Markuson said. "I think it's a great sport to help you judge if a kid also will be a good football player."

Olajubutu has played this season through knee, neck and shoulder injuries and drawn on his wrestling background to help overcome the pain.

"If you have the mentality you can survive a wrestling season, very few things measure up," Sharp said. "It helps your mental tenacity."

Olajubutu helped LaGrange win the Georgia Class 3A state football title his senior season and was an all-state player, but Arkansas and Mississippi State were the only SEC schools that recruited him.

"Sam was a hard sell to a lot of schools because of his size," Pardue said. "He was 5-9 and 200 pounds at the time, and everybody is looking at bigger and supposedly better players.

"A lot of people say now, 'Man, we should have taken him.' "

Olajubutu said he's grateful Arkansas looked beyond his height and gave him a chance.

"I have no regrets at all about coming to Arkansas," he said. "I've gotten better and better every year, and I have to thank my teammates and coaches for hanging in there with me."

Olajubutu said he knows he made the right choice to focus on football in college rather than wrestling, but there are times when he misses the feeling of taking down an opponent and pinning him to pull out a victory.

"I don't miss the wrestling practices," Olajubutu said with a laugh. "But I miss the matches and that feeling of being out on the mat, knowing you're on your own and it's all on you to win or lose."

OLAJUBUTU FILE

HOMETOWN LaGrange, Ga. HT/WT 5-9, 225 CLASS Fifth-year senior IN HIGH SCHOOLI All-state linebacker who led LaGrange to the Georgia Class 3A state title his senior season, when he made 170 tackles. Also wrestled in high school and won two area championships at the 189-pound and 215-pound weight classes and finished third in the state as a junior and senior. IN COLLEGE All-SEC linebacker who has made 39 career starts and ranks third on Arkansas' career tackles list with 369, including a team-high 112 this season. Career stats also include 30 1/2 tackles behind the line for losses totaling 85 yards, 4 forced fumbles and 1 fumble recovery.

Schedule of events

TODAY

Practice, 8:45 a.m., Freedom High School Team visit: MGM Theme Park, 4 p.m.

FRIDAY

Practice, 10:30 a.m., Freedom High School Sea World visit in afternoon

SATURDAY

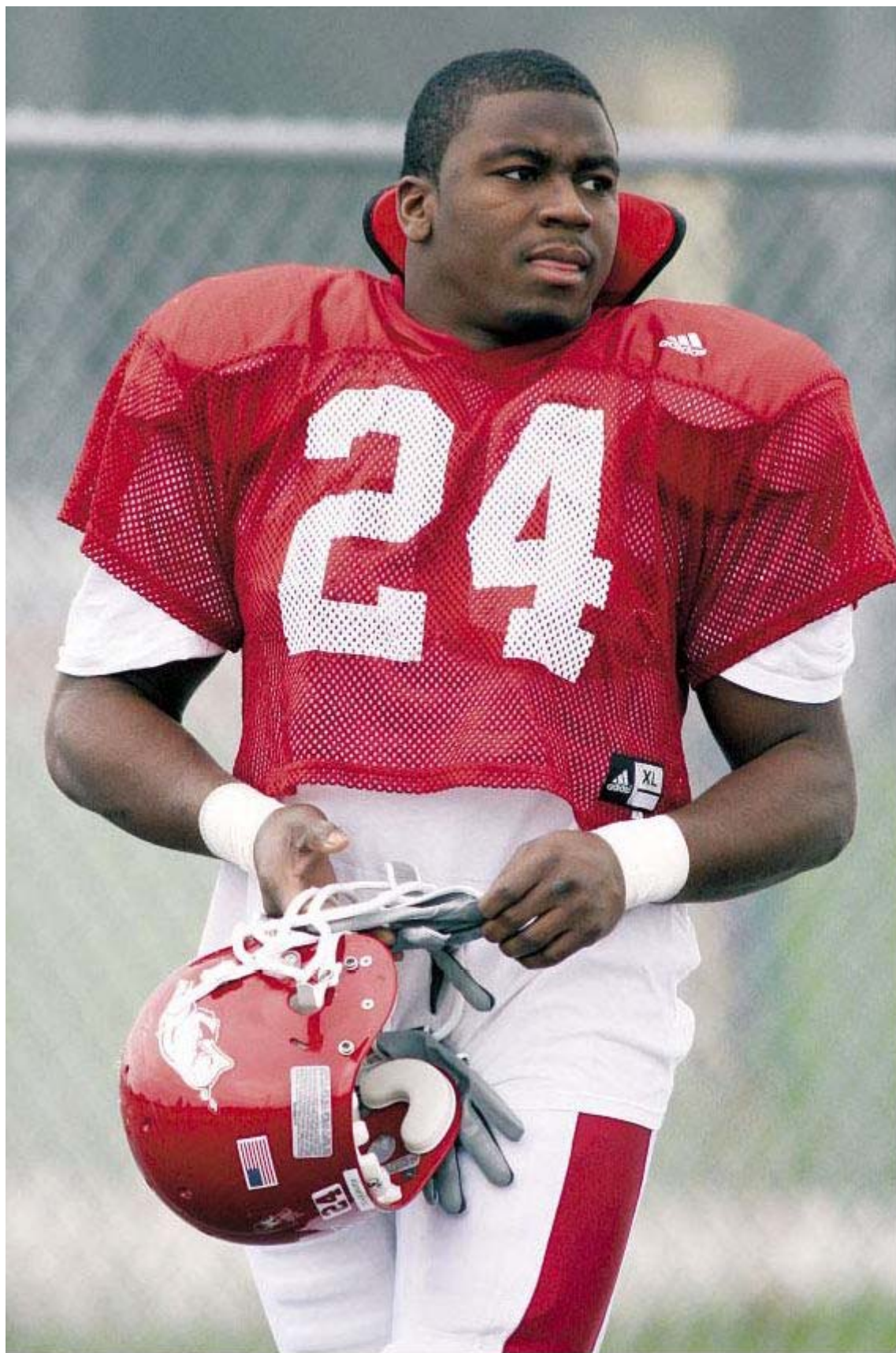
Practice, 10:30 a.m., Freedom High School News conferences: coordinators and players, 1 p.m.

SUNDAY

News conference: head coaches, 10:30 a.m. Kickoff luncheon, 11:30 p.m., Orlando Renaissance Final team walk-through, 1 p.m., Freedom High School

MONDAY

Capital One Bowl, noon, Citrus Bowl Stadium



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/RICK McFARLAND

Arkansas linebacker Sam Olajubutu credits wrestling training for his ability to bring down larger runners.

Olajubutu, 5-9, 225 pounds, has learned enough that he stands third on the Razorbacks' all-time tackling list. His 369 career tackles trail only Tony Bua (409) and Ken Hamlin (381).

