

COLLEGE FOOTBALL: MEET THE EAGLES

LIVING THE DREAM



THE HERALD-SUN | CODEY JOHNSTON

Michael Johnson, who played at Hillside High, was named N.C. Central's starting quarterback.

Former Hillside star Michael Johnson earns starting QB job at N.C. Central

BY JOE JOHNSON

jjohnson@heraldsun.com; 419-6667

DURHAM — Michael Johnson is fulfilling a dream.

Growing up, he was a ball-boy for N.C. Central and now he is the starting quarterback for the Eagles.

The former Hillside standout saw action in four games, including three starts, a year ago after transferring from Tulsa, and said his experience at Tulsa established a foundation that has allowed him to thrive with the Eagles.

"I learned so much while I was there [at Tulsa]," Johnson said. "It made me a better quarterback. It made me a better student."

Johnson's decision to transfer back to his hometown university was based primarily on being closer to family so they could see him play.

"It was a good experience but it was just difficult for my family to get out there to see me play," Johnson said. "My family likes to see me play so it was best for all

of us for me to come back."

Johnson said he feels like he has improved a lot since last season when he was thrust into action in the sixth game of the year against Presbyterian.

"Last year I played off natural ability, and it was like backyard football," Johnson said. "I was just learning the offense. But this year I know so much more about the offense. I know what everybody is supposed to be doing, and it will make a world of difference."

Johnson will have another familiar target in the lineup with the addition of Geovonie Irvine to go along with veteran Will Scott at wide receiver. While Scott, who led the Eagles with 45 catches for 787 yards last season, likely will receive most of the attention from opposing defenses, Irvine could be Johnson's safety valve. Johnson and Irvine played together at Hillside and both said it felt natural

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N.C. Central junior class president Dominique Everett (left) receives an autograph from Littbarski Blackwood (center) during "Meet the Eagles" on Saturday.

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to be back on the same team again.

"It is sort of like old times," Irvine said. "We've got chemistry. We know what each other can do. We're just on the same page."

Johnson beat out Keon Williams to be the starter. Williams appeared in seven games and started three after starter Stafford Brown suffered a season-ending injury against N.C. A&T last season.

"Keon is a competitor," Johnson said. "When he gets a

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Michael Johnson

N.C. Central starting quarterback

chance he'll come in and make a good throw. He's the type of guy who doesn't make many mistakes so you have to be on top of your game."

N.C. Central coach Mose Rison said it was important to select a starter in plenty of time to get ready for the first game.

"We had them compete in the first two weeks of camp but we knew a decision had to be made," Rison said.

N.C. Central opens its season

on Saturday at Hampton. Johnson said it would be a good test, especially since the Eagles are trying to find a home conference.

"If we can get off to a fast start, I think that's extremely important," Johnson said. "But if we do have a slow start we have what it takes to pick ourselves up very quickly. Hampton is already in the MEAC and we want to show we belong."