

Sports

## **LB Leon Jacobs set to make debut as Jaguars only rookie defensive starter vs. Giants**

By **John Reid**

Posted at 5:21 PM

Updated at 5:29 PM

In just four months, strong-side linebacker Leon Jacobs has gone from longshot seventh-round pick to the Jaguars' only projected rookie defensive starter for Sunday's opener against the New York Giants.

Taking advantage of his rapid rise, Jacobs held his own in training camp practices and rarely made repeated mistakes.

But now, he's got to show it in the regular season.

And most of the Jaguars' veteran defensive players believe he's ready.

"Leon came in and he just didn't sit around and say he's going to figure out his way during his rookie year," defensive tackle Abry Jones said. "He came and learned stuff, produced and he gets what he deserves."

Though the Jaguars selected Jacobs 230th overall during the NFL Draft in April, he beat out second-year linebackers Blair Brown and Donald Payne for the starting strong-side job before the veteran minicamp ended in June. Then, he picked up in training camp where he left off in the spring and continued to be a consistent performer throughout the preseason.

"I know once the regular season starts, the intensity is going to be higher and obviously guys are going to be coming," Jacobs said. "For me, though, I just going to play my game."

What initially caught starting middle linebacker Myles Jack's attention about Jacobs wasn't his performance on the field.

It's what he did off it.

“In the film room, he just seemed to pick up on things quickly,” Jack said. “For a young guy coming in, learning NFL defenses isn’t easy. So when you see a guy like him answering stuff and already knowing things, it’s shocking.”

Instead of studying his playbook up to two hours a day on his own time like he did throughout camp, Jacobs is now trying to watch as much film as possible on the Giants and their star rookie tailback Saquon Barkley, a former Penn State star who was the No. 2 overall pick in the 2018 draft.

“I’m ready,” said Jacobs, who played more games (59) than any other player in FBS history at Wisconsin. “I’ll study the game plans, listen to my coaches and come out and play.”

Veteran defensive end Calais Campbell said Jacobs appears to be a good addition to a defense that was one of the best in the league last season.

“He just came in and worked,” Campbell said. “Obviously he’s made a few mistakes, which is expected of a rookie. But he’s been performing his responsibilities very well and he’s got better each day. For most rookies, the biggest thing is being where you supposed to be. It’s hard for rookies because it’s a different playbook, the game is different and you’re moving to a higher level. He has a lot of verbal responsibilities, but he’s been very consistent.”

Coach Doug Marrone likes the Jacobs’ progress, but said he still has a long way to go.

“I know when we watched him I know I liked him and I was happy to get him,” Marrone said. “When he’s on the field he’s very bright, smart, strong. When he was out there he looked like an NFL football player.”

While Jacobs is the only rookie expected to start defensively, rookie defensive tackle Taven Bryan is likely to play Sunday. And rookie Logan Cooke is the starting punter and rookie wide receiver DJ Chark is likely to see action, too.

“My expectation is that I need you to give your best effort, your best foot forward, because those are things that do not take talent,” Marrone said about the Jaguars’ rookies. “To go out there and work extremely hard and do those things, for me, that’s what I look at from everyone.”

“And then it’s, can we develop them? Can we coach them? Do they have enough talent, strength and knowledge to go out there and produce and perform? For me, I start with that foundation and I don’t like to do that. Personally, I don’t like to put expectations before I start seeing the players play and actually watch them play.”