

Chris Sailer Kicking & Rubio Long Snapping

Featured Article

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05...04...you're Not Even A Real Player...03...02... but You Will Make This Kick...

The do-or-die life of kickers - outsiders in their own game - forges a bond that connects them across generations, and misses.

BY LEE JENKINS

Ten years after the kick that changed his life, Phil Brabbs walked onto the patio of a coffee shop last Thursday and took three steps back, two to the left. Moments earlier he'd looked like any other suntanned tourist in Emerald Isle, N.C., checking his e-mail at the Beans-N-Screens Internet Café. Now he was standing over an imaginary left hash mark, in his sandals, reciting Philippians 4:13. It was the verse he chose at Michigan Stadium on Aug. 31, 2002, with five seconds remaining and the Wolverines trailing Washington 29--28. Brabbs was a junior at Ann Arbor who took out student loans because he was not on scholarship. Until that day he had never attempted a field goal in college. Early in the first quarter he missed wide left, and late in the second he missed left again—a snap hook that barely rose more than 10 feet off the ground. At halftime Brabbs was booed by the sellout crowd as he jogged into the locker room, where he sat with his head in his hands. Before the third quarter he missed every one of his warmups, all to the left. Coaches benched Brabbs in favor of his best friend, Troy Nienberg.

With 1:24 left in the fourth quarter, Nienberg pushed a go-ahead 27-yard field goal to the right, and Brabbs told himself, Not only am I going to get lynched, my best friend is going to get lynched with me. But an unfathomable sequence ensued: a Washington three-and-out; a fourth-down pass to Michigan receiver Braylon Edwards that was dropped, ruled a fumble (in the days before replay) and recovered by another Wolverine; and, finally, a too-many-men-on-the-field penalty against the Huskies that set up a 44-yard field goal try. Lloyd Carr didn't summon Brabbs so much as shove him. "Get out there," the coach growled. As Brabbs loped onto the field, he looked at the stands and noticed that maybe 10% of the fans had gone. Still, about 100,000 remained. "I was the last guy they wanted to see," Brabbs says. Michigan receiver Ronald Bellamy grabbed him. "You've got this," he barked.

In the movie *Wildcats*, a 1986 football comedy, head coach Goldie Hawn approaches her kicker late in a game and tells him, "You make this ... and every girl in the free world will want you." The stakes for college kickers today are, if

possible, even higher: glory or ignominy, immortality or oblivion, love letters or death threats. You can be Auburn's Wes Byrum, whose 19-yard field goal to win the BCS championship two years ago has been commemorated with a limited-edition painting (\$395 for an 18 by 24), or Florida State's Gerry Thomas, whose missed 34-yarder against Miami 21 years ago still prompts jeers of "wide right." Last season the Sugar Bowl and the Fiesta Bowl were won by kickers, after they were both lost by the opposing kickers. Four teams were eliminated from national title consideration because of foot faults. Alabama could have been one of them, flubbing four field goals in a November loss to LSU, but Crimson Tide kicker Jeremy Shelley drained five to beat the Tigers in the rematch. "It's kind of unfair," says former Rutgers kicker Jeremy Ito, who hammered a game-winner from 28 yards to topple Louisville in 2006. "The good feelings you get from making one don't outweigh the bad feelings you get from missing one." We celebrate the kicker because, in many cases, he reminds us of ourselves. He's not 300 pounds; he wasn't recruited out of elementary school; and he isn't going to declare early for the draft. We ridicule him, of course, for the same reason. "A lot of fans think they can do a better job," says former USC kicker Adam Abrams, who made the go-ahead field goal in the 1996 Rose Bowl and a game-winner a year later at Notre Dame. "That's where some of the hostility comes from."

NFL kickers are under similar stress, but they don't go to class with their critics the next day, baseball caps pulled low over their eyes as the professor takes roll. The pros have learned over the years how to reconcile jubilation and despair. The collegians are often no more seasoned in the spotlight than Brabbs. They receive little individual coaching at their schools. They practice alone before their teammates hit the field. They lean on one another, a widespread fraternity of current and former kickers, because no one else can relate. They are in action for only seconds a game, adding up to mere minutes a season. But in those throbbing moments they create memories that will forever inspire them, or haunt them, or both.

I felt like I was frozen in time," says Brabbs, "and then I saw the ball fly between the uprights, and I woke up." He didn't know what to do, so he ran, as fast as he could toward midfield until Bellamy caught him and wrestled him down. A hundred teammates leaped on top of them. Bellamy shrieked at the bottom of the dog pile. "I could have died right there," Brabbs says, "and I'd have died happy." He was the last one to the locker room, where the captains stood on their chairs and led the team in "The Victors," a Michigan tradition. Carr left one chair open for Brabbs. After the fight song and the press conference and the celebratory dinner with his family at Applebee's—"I was like a presidential candidate!" Brabbs marvels—he went to his girlfriend's apartment. He was asleep by 10:30 p.m.

Besides the Michigan hard cores, no one heard from Phil Brabbs again. He injured his quad later in the season and tore it in the summer. He made two field goals the rest of his career. He graduated with a degree in engineering, landed a job as an IT project manager and married his girlfriend, Cassie. They had a son, Ocean, and two daughters, Iris and Ruby. They bought a house six blocks from Michigan Stadium. In 2007, while Brabbs was training for a marathon, he felt a pain in his left ankle. Doctors discovered a blood clot in his left leg and, a

few months later, another in his right. The day after Brabbs turned 28, he received a diagnosis of multiple myeloma, a cancer of the blood.

He chose the most aggressive treatment: two bone-marrow transplants and seven cycles of chemotherapy. "You're completely exhausted, lying on your back, and you have a lot of time to think," Brabbs says. "I'd never really savored the kick—I just sort of stowed it away in my heart—but I started to reflect on it a lot. I tapped into the hope from that game. I asked myself, Why can't you do it again?"

This spring, tests revealed that Brabbs was free of the myeloma protein, and in June he delivered the commencement address at Frankenmuth (Mich.) High. He knew what the administrators were expecting, a speech about his victories, over Washington and cancer. But if they wanted him to gloat, they should have invited a receiver. Brabbs looked at the students and told them, "Be a failure. It's the misses that propel you forward."

When Brabbs was a freshman, Michigan beat Alabama 35--34 in the Orange Bowl after Ryan Pflugner pushed an extra point in overtime. Most Wolverines rejoiced but not Brabbs. "It didn't feel right," he says. "That kid had to go home, and who knows what happened."

Pflugner went to medical school and became an orthopedic surgeon. Thomas, who famously missed right against Miami, became a lawyer. So did Dan Mowrey, who followed Thomas at Florida State, and missed right against the Hurricanes a year later. Mowrey nailed three field goals that afternoon at the Orange Bowl and never imagined the Seminoles would need a fourth. "We were driving at the end, and I was thinking, We're going to score and beat these guys," Mowrey says. "I was a dumb, cocky kid, and I didn't realize the gravity of the situation. That's what still bothers me. I wasn't ready." At Lincoln (Fla.) High, Mowrey developed a routine he followed every time his team crossed the 50-yard line: Warm up into the net, visualize the kick, strap on the helmet. When Florida State coach Bobby Bowden turned to Mowrey with eight seconds left and the Seminoles down 19--16, his helmet was still in his hand. "Oh, s---," Mowrey said.

Players coming off the field were asking, "Why are we kicking?" Mowrey was wondering the same thing. All of a sudden the snap was down, and the 39-yard field goal was up. "You know how people talk about their life flashing in front of their eyes?" Mowrey says. "I saw a flash of every kick I'd ever hit." Mowrey belly flopped to the turf, and after he returned to Tallahassee he found notes on his car begging him to transfer. Even some of his friends claimed they could have split those uprights. He led them all inside Doak Campbell Stadium, placed the ball on the left hash at the 29 and implored them to try. Mowrey lost his starting job as a junior, but Florida State played for the national championship in Miami, and on his first day back at the Orange Bowl he walked to the left hash. He put the ball on a tee, clobbered it into the seats and spit on the spot. The Seminoles won the title with a last-minute 22-yarder by Mowrey's replacement, Scott Bentley, and a last-minute shank by Nebraska kicker Byron Bennett. The scars did not fully heal until Mowrey was a senior, at dinner with his girlfriend, and a patron shouted, "Hey, Wide Right! What's up, Wide Right?"

Mowrey rose. "I'm Dan Mowrey, and yeah, I missed wide right," he said. "If you want to put up a billboard, I'll help you pay for it. But if you're just having a bad day, come over here right now and I'll give you a hug." Mowrey regained his job and made his final kick at Doak Campbell, an extra point that sealed a tie after an unforgettable 28-point fourth-quarter comeback against Florida. Mowrey now tutors the Gators' kicker, Caleb Sturgis, and tells him, "I want you to beat everybody but FSU." And what if Florida-FSU comes down to a Sturgis field goal? "I'd rather he make it," Mowrey says. "I don't want to see a guy miss." Two years ago, Boise State was 10--0 and riding a 24-game winning streak, with a senior kicker who was the leading scorer in the history of the Western Athletic Conference. But in Week 11, against Nevada, with the score tied in the final seconds, Kyle Brotzman missed a 26-yard field goal to the right. He tried to compensate in overtime and missed a 29-yarder to the left. Instead of playing Auburn for the BCS championship, the Broncos faced Utah in the Las Vegas Bowl—and went from a payout of \$21.2 million to \$1 million. Mowrey wrote Brotzman a letter. "I told him that one kick doesn't define who you are," Mowrey recalls. "And I think I also told him that sometimes, you just have to say, F--- it." Mowrey asks what Brotzman is doing today. "Give him my love," he says. The two field goals happened so fast, back-to-back, I didn't have a chance to forget about the first one," says Brotzman, now with the Utah Blaze of the Arena Football League. "It was in my head, and once that happens, you're set up to miss again." Social media have made kicking more hazardous than ever. "People called and left messages," Brotzman says, "but more than that it was threats on Facebook from gamblers who lost money."

A week after the game Jeret (Speedy) Peterson, a Boise native and three-time Olympic aerial skier, contacted Brotzman through a mutual friend and visited him. Peterson, who was sexually abused as a child and once saw a friend commit suicide in front of him, had long struggled with alcoholism and depression. "It's hard for some of us to open up and talk about our feelings," says Brotzman. "He wanted me to talk about what I was going through. It was a relief to get things off my back."

In July 2011, Peterson killed himself, and Brotzman thought about what he could do to honor him. "Speedy didn't know me, but he changed my life," Brotzman says. "I wanted to be there for someone in the same way." When Alabama missed all those field goals against LSU, Brotzman wrote an empathetic e-mail to starting kicker Cade Foster and included his phone number. A week later he watched undefeated Boise State play TCU from his father's tailgating spot outside Broncos Stadium and recoiled when kicker Dan Goodale missed a 39-yard game-winning field goal. Again, Boise tumbled from the BCS to the Vegas Bowl. Brotzman texted Goodale immediately, went to practice the following week and sat with the despondent kicker in the film room. "It was anxiety," Brotzman says. "His mechanics fell apart in some areas, and he pushed the ball right, just like me."

Goodale had attempted only three field goals in his college career, none longer than 32 yards. But he was more experienced than Virginia Tech's Justin Myer, who had tried two heading into January's Sugar Bowl. Myer was supposed to be the third-string placekicker against Michigan, until starter Cody Journell was arrested two weeks before the game for breaking and entering (he was found

guilty of a reduced charge of misdemeanor trespassing) and backup Tyler Weiss was sent home on a Greyhound bus for missing curfew in New Orleans. The Hokies are renowned for their special teams. At the beginning of every practice, coach Frank Beamer leads his kickers into Lane Stadium, then stands over their shoulders as they hold a field goal contest. The result of each boot is recorded in a notebook. The exercise is intense, but it lasts only 20 minutes, and the Virginia Tech specialists spend the rest of practice in roughly the same way as their counterparts across the country.

"We make snow cones from the ice in the medical cooler and fill them with Gatorade," says Collin Carroll, a Virginia Tech long snapper for the past five years. "Then we sit by the fan in the shade. Sometimes we play touch football with each other or have a punt-pass-kick competition because it's the only thing we know how to do. That's why we're perpetually teased and mocked and borderline scorned." The week of the Sugar Bowl, Virginia Tech spent more time than usual on field goals during the team portion of practice, and Myer missed every one. "Guys were like, Are you kidding me?" Carroll says. "This is not going to be pretty." The Hokies hid their concern. Players told Myer they believed in him. Coaches promised not to yell at him. Carroll did not admit that his legs were shaking when Myer lined up for his first attempt at the Superdome. But the most shocking thing happened. Myer made it, and then he made another one, and two more after that. He was 4 for 4 heading into overtime. After Myer sent a 37-yarder to the right, and Virginia Tech lost 23--20, Beamer stood in the locker room and said, "What a great job Justin Myer did tonight." The team cheered. The best game of Myer's career ended with a miss. Myer and Carroll were both seniors, and on their way to the bus, the kicker told the snapper, "I feel like I did pretty well, but I really wish I made that last one." Carroll stifled a laugh. He didn't tell Myer what he was thinking: "Most obvious statement ever."

U2 released a song in 2001 called "Stuck in a Moment You Can't Get Out Of," and the accompanying video focuses on a fictional kicker named Paul Hewson, who clanks a game-winning field goal off the right post with three seconds left. While Bono wails from the stands, Hewson replays the kick in his head, driving himself so batty he starts to imagine the holder as a giant bunny rabbit. The video ends with a shot of Hewson in a mail carrier uniform, some 40 years down the road, set to the verse: "It's just a moment. This time will pass." Paul Hewson, U2 devotees may recall, is Bono's given name.

The idol of every distraught college kicker stands 5'7" and is the assistant manager at a Sherwin Williams in Portland. A former Oregon State walk-on, Alexis Serna worked the graveyard shift as a janitor to make tuition, and his first game was on national television at LSU in 2004. Serna missed three extra points, the last in overtime, and the Beavers lost by one. As he cried in the locker room afterward, defensive players yelled at him, and he couldn't look any of them in the eye. Kickers start at the bottom of the college football hierarchy, building goodwill three points at a time, but Serna had none in reserve. One e-mail from a supposed fan read, "Your parents are embarrassed of you." Another: "You should go kill yourself."

Serna also received a letter from a 12-year-old boy in Spokane named Austan

Pierce, who was suffering from soft-tissue bone cancer. He encouraged the kicker to move on. Serna analyzed his gaffes with help from then Saints kicker John Carney and identified his problem. Usually, a kicker takes about 1.35 seconds between snap and contact. At LSU, Serna had taken about 1.19. "I was way too excited and moving way too fast," he says. "I wasn't seeing the ball." He was benched for a game, and when he returned against New Mexico, he was booed when he attempted a field goal. A week later, against Arizona State, he attempted his first extra point. "I was super scared; my body was really hot; and I didn't know how I was going to walk up to the ball," Serna says. He made that extra point, as well as every other one he tried over the next four years, 144 straight. He won the Lou Groza Award in 2005, given to the nation's premier kicker, and when he was introduced on Senior Day in '07, the crowd at Reser Stadium grew so loud he couldn't hear the public-address announcer say his name.

From Oregon State to the CFL, Serna wrote the initials AP on his thumbs before every game, to remember Austan Pierce. Serna beams as he talks about Pierce, whose left leg was amputated in high school, but who now plays wheelchair basketball at Texas-Arlington. Serna still follows the Pac-12, and when Stanford freshman Jordan Williamson missed three field goals in the Fiesta Bowl, including a 35-yard game-winner at the end of regulation and a 43-yarder in overtime, he sent him a Facebook message that read in part: "You know you're a better kicker than that."

Williamson was one of the best last fall, making 11 of 12 field goals, before he tore a muscle in his groin and started hooking every ball left. "Part of our job is counseling," says former UCLA kicker Chris Sailer, who trains hundreds of FBS kickers, including Williamson. "A lot of guys get a job as a young player, falter early and can't get over it. I see that all the time." Since 1978, when Division I split, college field goal percentages have climbed from 58.8 to a record 73.8 in 2010, in part because so many kickers work with private coaches like Sailer. However, they still lag well behind their NFL brethren, who made 82.9% of field goals in '11.

Last Friday night at Stanford Stadium, with two seconds remaining in the first half against San Jose State, Williamson trotted out for his first field goal since the Fiesta Bowl. "It's still in my mind, and I think it always will be," Williamson said. "But it has to motivate you instead of break you." As he spoke, he was wearing a Fiesta Bowl cap. Several kickers contacted for this story asked about Williamson. They wanted to know how he was doing and whether he received their notes. They said they would watch him this season.

Out on the field Williamson took three steps back and two to the left, pausing only to draw an imaginary line between the uprights. He wiggled his arms, the way he always does, as if he's shaking out the tension. The field goal was 46 yards, the longest of Williamson's career, spotted on the troublesome left hash. He cleared his mind and swung his right leg. He drilled it.

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