



Leg Work

By MICHAEL BRADLEY

While coaches acknowledge that kicking is a critical part of football, many are uncomfortable teaching something they have limited experience with but a little detective work can make the job a lot easier.

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HE MISS STUNG, like rock salt ground into a fresh wound. Worse still was the criticism that followed from fans and the media. Nobody cared that Javier Beorlegui had lost 11 pounds due to the flu in the days leading up to the game. They didn't want excuses. They wanted a straight kick on an extra point. How hard could that be?

As it turned out, pretty tough. In September 1999, Beorlegui missed a PAT attempt late in the University of Central Florida's game against Southeastern Conference power Georgia. It cost the Golden Knights a chance at an upset victory and the kind of signature triumph that can catapult an emerging program to prominence. UCF lost, 24-23, and Beorlegui was the loneliest man in Orlando.

Matt Rock remembers that day well. As the Knights' full-time kicking assistant at the time, it was Rock's job to help Beorlegui process the aftermath of the miss. He tried to console Beorlegui and explained how even the greatest kickers have missed key attempts. Rock told the sophomore that he still had a bright future ahead. And then Rock issued a challenge.

"I asked him, 'What are you made of?'" says Rock, now the team's video assistant. "I said he could either cry in his beer or keep his mouth shut and work like hell."

Beorlegui chose Option Two. He worked hard, didn't make excuses, and one year later, he delivered. Beorlegui had already made three field goals when he lined up a 37-yard attempt with three seconds remaining and the Knights trailing host Alabama, 38-37. Beorlegui knew none of his successful kicks would be remembered if he didn't deliver the game-winning kick under pressure.

This time, Beorlegui was perfect. His kick sailed through the uprights, silencing the 80,000-plus Crimson Tide zealots and giving UCF the 40-38 win. Beorlegui eventually finished the season as a semifinalist for the Lou Groza Award, given annually to the nation's top kicker, and was named MVP of Central Florida's special teams.

Welcome to the wild world of football kicking and punting. Just about any player who has ever booted a ball in earnest has a story similar to Beorlegui's, as do most coaches. And those who don't, soon will.

Although some players look at kickers and punters with disdain, since they spend little time on the field and rarely hit or get hit, there are few coaches who dispute their importance to a team's success. Games are often decided by field goals and PATs. And it's impossible to win the vaunted battle for field position without a strong and consistent punter.

As a result, it's vital that coaches provide proper guidance and training for their golden-footed players. But this is far from an easy task. Few coaches, particularly those on the high school level, have ever kicked in games. Most initially know little about teaching the proper method of dropping a ball for a punt or where a soccer-style kicker should plant his foot on placement attempts.

Football may be one-third special teams, as so many coaches insist, but often it's not coached that way. Although NFL teams have coaches to address virtually every aspect of the game, few colleges and only the rarest high schools have that luxury. Many programs use a position coach to direct the specialists, hoping knowledge he picks up at clinics and on videotapes will suffice. Others use volunteer assistants who can't be on the field during games and have limited practice responsibilities. Some simply let the kickers direct themselves, relying on guidance they receive during off-season camps and in special one-on-one sessions.

"I'm not an expert," admits Notre Dame's Kirk Doll, who coaches the Fighting Irish linebackers and also directs the kickers. "We have a kicking academy here each summer as part of our football camp, and we use specialists from around the country as part of that. I've also learned about the position at the American Football Coaches Association's national convention, where there have been some seminars. Plus, I learn a lot from the players."

Boston College Special Teams Coach Jerry Petercuskie had no illusions about being an expert at kicking when he started coaching the specialists. He played center at BC in the early 1970's and has coached the offensive line, receivers, defensive front, and linebackers during his career. He did know enough, though, to search for some answers.

"It's like anything else that you want to learn," Petercuskie says. "You do a lot of research. I always go to professional training camps to talk with their special teams coaches. I try to affiliate myself

with people who know how to coach kicking and punting."

Expert Education

A former staff member at Eastern Kentucky and Arizona State, Rick Sang has become one of the nation's most successful kicking coaches, working with former NFL greats Ray Guy and Jim Breech to build a collection of 16 academies (American Football Specialists) across the country that help punters and kickers. Sang and his partners also work with collegiate specialists mid-season to help correct a problem or enhance their abilities. His Web site, prokicker.com, offers a gateway to instruction and kicking information that can help players and coaches learn more about the kicking positions.

Sang can talk forever about kicking and punting, but he begins with a simple rule: time everything. "Coaches need to time their kickers and punters constantly," he says. The goal is not to get the ball away as fast as possible, but to hit a mark—1.25 to 1.4 seconds for placements and 2.0 to 2.1 seconds for punts—that allows for maximum success.

"There is a misconception that faster means better," Sang says. "In the NFL, kickers get it off in 1.25 to 1.3 seconds. Sometimes, a high school coach will say his guy can kick it in 1.1. He doesn't need to do that. It doesn't impress me."

Sang also recommends all head coaches allow just one assistant to handle the kickers. The head man can add some guidance every now and then, but no one else.

Rutgers Assistant Coach Mike Miello can offer a good example of why kickers shouldn't allow too many people to interfere with their techniques. The first-year Scarlet Knights Running Backs Coach was a long-time head coach at Ramapo and Hackensack High Schools in northern New Jersey, where he won 66 percent of his games and five state titles. One summer, his all-county kicker from Ramapo went to numerous camps and subjected himself to endless one-on-one work with various experts. The result was disastrous.

"He couldn't kick an extra point," Miello says. "He lost his job, because he listened to too many people."

Although Sang feels that all the coaching for the kickers should come from one

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voice, he doesn't think that voice need always say the same thing. He believes in allowing kickers to develop their own styles. While many soccer-style booters step back three steps and over two before each placement try, some need less of an angle. He refers to the differences between NFL kickers Morten Andersen, who punches the ball, and Jason Elam, who has a textbook style. Still, both get good results. "Avoid telling a kicker there's only one way to do it," Sang says.

Regardless of style, Sang stresses the importance of a proper follow through. Whether soccer-style or straight-on, all kickers should have their plant foot skip through after the kick. Instead of keeping that foot stuck next to the spot where the ball has been struck, it should hop forward a foot or two. "The whole body goes through toward the target," he says.

Rock offers several drills coaches can use with their kickers, beginning with the no-step drill. A kicker should set the ball five to eight yards from the goal post, plant his foot, and kick the ball over the crossbar. This promotes good lift and balance. Move back five yards and do the same thing with just one step. There will be grumbling since kickers all want to try long field goals, but it's vital to have the fundamentals down first. "I tell them that if they can't make a 30-yarder, they won't get a chance at a 50-yarder," Rock says.

Petercuskie has his kickers spot the ball on the sideline and put the ball through the uprights despite the sharp angle. That helps them handle kicks from the hash marks and teaches accuracy.

At Notre Dame, Doll spends a lot of time working on the plant foot. "If you're too close to the ball, you'll push it or get it blocked, because you can't get your hips through," he says. "If you're too far away, you'll hook the ball."

Regardless of the drills and exercises a coach uses, Sang emphasizes the importance of videotaping each workout. That way, a coach can better offer tips during the season or spot slight changes in mechanics that can have a major effect on the outcome.

Sang is also a big proponent of weight training to develop the strength needed in the legs and abdominal muscles, as well as vital flexibility, but he cautions against too much of a good thing. He feels that kickers shouldn't lift before kicking since the body will compensate for tired muscles and possibly spoil an otherwise sound technique. He

also believes that kickers should taper their workouts as game day approaches. "Some kickers won't even kick the day before a game," he says. "They do their big work early in the week, so their leg is full of life come game time."

Rock, meanwhile, emphasizes the need for flexibility, which can be developed through strength and conditioning workouts. For example, even though UCF's Beorlegui is 6-foot-2 and 230 pounds, he is one of the most flexible players on the Golden Knights' team.

Team Players

While technique and proper drilling are vital to the development of kickers, most coaches are also aware of the psychological aspects of the position. Many experts liken kicking a football to swinging a golf club. There are many different techniques, but all share several mandates that must be met.

In golf, that means a smooth backswing, quick turn of the hips, and strong front leg. Keep the head down. Follow through. Kickers have to plant correctly, follow through (don't forget the skip) and keep their heads down, too. Sounds easy, until the game is on the line, opponents are snarling a few yards away, and teammates, coaches, and fans are counting on a successful kick for a victory.

Rick Rodriguez, who is in his second year as Head Coach at Largo (Fla.) High School in the Tampa area, has been on high school staffs for 24 years and worked with some outstanding kickers. His current specialist is Brandon Mai, rated by some as the nation's top prep kicking prospect and by Street & Smith as one of the nation's best 50 players, regardless of position. Last year, Mai kicked three field goals longer than 50 yards and six from beyond 40. He also kicked a 35-yarder at the gun to tie a game at 10 and then another in overtime to secure the victory.

Even with all the faith he's developed in his kicker, Rodriguez doesn't like to rely on Mai to win games. "I tell my teams, 'It should never come down to a field goal,'" Rodriguez says. "We shouldn't put all that pressure on one person."

Still, that pressure is there, and it's usually better if the specialist is part of the team, rather than someone who keeps to himself and mixes with other players a few times a week. Mai stays busy during Largo's three-hour practices, running through a routine of his own. Although Mai's routine differs from his

teammates', Rodriguez insists the kicker is well-accepted. "Brandon's teammates know his role," Rodriguez says.

Tony Severino, head coach at Rockhurst High School in Kansas City, Mo., goes one step further. No player can kick for him without playing another position on the team. Dan Baker, who kicked at Missouri in the late 1980s, played cornerback at Rockhurst. In the 1986 state championship game, Baker scored all the points in a 10-7 win, recovering a fumble for a touchdown, kicking the extra point, and adding a field goal with two seconds left to win the game.

"I want my kickers to block, tackle, and run," Severino says. "I want them in the flow of the game. Most of my successful kickers have also been good football players.

"I've had soccer players come to me and ask to kick," Severino continues. "I say, 'Sure, as long as you learn to block and tackle and run and make this a priority and play soccer only as a sideline. Then it's okay.' None of them has done it."

While Severino's tactics may be a little severe and possibly rob him of a great kicking prospect, other coaches share his beliefs about making sure kickers are part of the team and included in the flow of the game and practice. When Miello was a head coach, he incorporated special teams drills into the middle of every practice, rather than saving them for the beginning or end of workouts. When the kickers are included on a regular basis, they are less likely to be overcome by pressure on big kicks. They have jobs to do, just like everyone else on the team. "You have to make it known to everyone how important that play is," Miello says.

Perfecting the Punt

If you happen to be on the Boston College campus and see some young men who appear to be lost basketball players with the wrong kind of equipment, you have probably just encountered the Eagles punters, doing one of their drop drills. Petercuskie makes them walk around the field or a track dropping a football and catching it as it bounces back to them—200 times.

Drop it right, and it caroms straight up. Angle it too much, and it will ricochet unpredictably. "It's like placing a ball on a table," Petercuskie says.

Since punting doesn't produce any direct points for a team, it is perhaps the most unsung part of football. But a good

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punter can be worth a couple touch-downs to a team, thanks to his ability to pin opponents deep in their own territory and dictate field position. Like place-kicking, however, it remains mysterious to many coaches. That's why summer camps, videotapes, and specialists like Sang exist.

One of the first things a coach needs to determine is whether the punter will use two or two-and-a-half steps before making contact with the ball. Many coaches believe the fewer steps, the quicker the ball is launched. Sang asserts that Guy, who averaged 42.4 yards per kick during his career and was known for his tremendous hang time, used two-and-a-half steps and once went 614 straight punts without a block.

Rock, on the other hand, believes that a two-step style is best, since it promotes a quicker release and not everyone is as talented as Guy was.

Sang wants punters positioned 12 to 15 yards behind the center, although high school players are often closer, since the snappers may not be able to deliver the ball well enough over longer distances. The kicking leg should be aligned with the middle of the ball, with the arms dangling and the knees slightly bent.

"A two-and-a-half-step kicker should have his plant foot slightly back," Sang

says. "The first step should be with that foot. For two-step punters, the kicking foot should be back, and the first step should be with that foot."

The ball should be accepted with arms outstretched and the hands moving toward the ball. After the ball has been watched all the way into the hands, it should be spun so the laces are up and the hand on the kicking side is on the back third of the ball, with the middle finger along the seam.

"The laces should be aligned with the outer edge of the shoulder on the punting side," Sang says. "That's what gets the spiral."

Now comes the most important, yet overlooked, part of a punt and the reason Petercuskie's charges can be seen dribbling a football. Every successful punt begins with a successful drop.

"Some flip it out, and some throw it up in the air," Rock says. "But that can put the ball too far from or too close to the drop spot."

The punter's arms should be extended forward, and the guide (non-punting side) hand released naturally. The ball is dropped by releasing the other hand, so that the ball falls straight down, in exactly the same position as when it was held.

The rest is basic. Punters should drive their leg through the sweet spot of the

ball, with their toes fully extended and pointing toward the target. The plant leg should be locked during the kick to better generate power. The follow through should be natural and the plant leg should skip through, as on a place kick.

"Coaches need to teach the technique and then give their players a checklist, so that they can prepare," Sang says. "It's like taking a test; it's all about preparation. How much have you worked on it?"

That's a good question for coaches, too. They must put their punt teams in positions to succeed, so practice is vital. In addition to the punter doing his job, the snapper must be able to deliver the ball crisply, and there must be good blocking schemes up front to prevent blocks.

Of course, it helps when a punter can move around a little bit himself. Guy had 18 interceptions as a safety at Southern Mississippi, so he was certainly able to handle any uncertainties. That's why Rockhurst's Severino wants an athlete, not just a specialist, punting for him.

"It's a little more involved than just kicking," he says. "It's an extension of your defense, so I want a player in there. If there's a bad snap, or there are other problems, he'll handle it better."

And a vital—but little understood—part of football will be in good hands. ■

Although many coaches are wary of turning over the kicking duties to a player with little or no prior football experience, others have found it to be their best option. At Texas Christian University, for example, junior Nick Browne earned the starting place kicking job for 2001 while maintaining his spot as the top midfielder on the Horned Frogs soccer team.

Dan Sharp, Special Teams Coordinator and Tight Ends Coach at TCU, was looking for someone to replace graduated all-conference kicker Chris Kaylakie when a soccer coach mentioned one of his players might be interested in the job. Sharp replied that he'd take a look at just about anybody who was interested and was impressed by Browne from the beginning of spring workouts.

"He struck the ball very well," Sharp says. "It was just a matter of getting his timing down."

Most college coaches like to see their place kickers get the kick off in 1.3 seconds, but Browne was around 1.5 seconds for much of the spring. As he worked with his holder and snapper, though, Browne eventually reduced that time to 1.25 to 1.32 seconds.

CHANGING FIELDS

"A large part of it is just getting repetitions with the holder and having trust in him," Sharp says. "Sometimes, if a kicker doesn't trust that the ball is going to be there, he wants to wait to make sure it's there first."

Sharp was also impressed with the way Browne carried himself. "To me, the biggest question is, 'Can the kid handle pressure?'" he says. "It really doesn't matter how good a kicker he is if he can't handle the pressure once he gets out there. And his demeanor was probably the thing that set him apart from most of the other guys."

"He's one of the best players on the soccer team so he's been in pressure situations before," Sharp continues. "And, although I'm sure he cares deeply whether he makes a kick, he has a certain nonchalant attitude, which is probably the best kind of guy to have in a stressful situation with a lot of pressure."

The team has had to make a few adjustments with Browne's arrival. The special teams work has moved from the end of

practice to the beginning so Browne can make soccer practice. And travel arrangements have been complex when he plays soccer and football games in different cities on the same weekend. But dealing with these inconveniences paid off when Browne tied a school record with four field goals in a 19-5 win over North Texas.

"When this first started, I was skeptical about him going out there," Sharp says. "But now I would tell any coach in the same situation to give him a chance."

Attempts to convert soccer players to football kickers should probably be limited to place kickers instead of punters, though. Most soccer players—particularly goalies, who do the most punting during soccer games—kick across their bodies, a habit that must be corrected before punting, according to Kirk Doll, Assistant Head Coach at Notre Dame. "Because of the protection needs of the punting game, a punter can't have his leg go that wide," he explains. D.R.