

Chris Sailer Kicking & Rubio Long Snapping

Featured Article

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One Jet's Upside-Down Dream

Long Snapping in the NFL Was Tanner Purdum's Goal, and He Went to Great Lengths to Reach It

BY SCOTT CACCIOLA



Tanner Purdum hones his long-snapping technique during Wednesday's practice at the Jets training facility in Florham Park. Emile Wamsteker for The Wall Street Journal

FLORHAM PARK, N.J.—Inside the Jets' locker room, two stalls frame the door to the training room. Around professional sports, these lockers tend to be the most coveted by athletes, providing a quick escape from the media whenever the players' inner sanctum is open to public inspection. Derek Jeter and Jorge Posada, for example, occupy those lockers in the home clubhouse at Yankee Stadium.

With the Jets, quarterback Mark Sanchez owns one of them, which probably comes as no surprise. But the other belongs to Tanner Purdum, the team's long snapper—which, in its own way, also makes perfect sense.

Mr. Purdum wants to protect his anonymity. In his line of work, there is a universal truth: Nobody knows your name until something goes horribly wrong.

Through three games with the Jets, the 26-year-old Mr. Purdum has done almost everything right. He has taken the field 25 times to snap the ball on extra points, field goals and punts, and he has yet to miss his target. He hopes to continue that trend when the Jets (2-1, 2-0 AFC East) visit the Buffalo Bills (0-3, 0-2) on Sunday.

The NFL has become a highly specialized league, and each team reserves one of 45 roster spots for a long snapper. These guys tend to be good at what they do. There were only 71 botched snaps last season out of 4,647 plays that featured place-kicking and punting units. That works out to a 98.5% success rate. But the job is a high-wire act, and mistakes are costly.

"It's tough when you have to snap something between your legs and then get up and try to block a 300-pound guy," said Nick Folk, the Jets' placekicker. "I think it's hard for people to really understand until they try to fire one, then get run over."

The patron saint for long snapping gone wrong is Trey Junkin, who came out of retirement at age 41 to handle those duties for the Giants during the playoffs after the 2002 season. With nine seconds left in an NFC first-round game, the Giants lined up to attempt a game-winning 41-yard field goal against the San Francisco 49ers. But Mr. Junkin skipped his snap to holder Matt Allen, who fumbled the ball and then took off running before he chucked an errant pass downfield—a move of pure, white-hot panic. It was a mess. The Giants lost. And Mr. Junkin shouldered the blame, his otherwise sterling 19-year career marred by that one play.



Mr. Purdum is a perfect 25-for-25 on snaps this season. Emile Wamsteker for The Wall Street Journal

"A quarterback can throw 40 passes in a game and misfire on a few, and it's OK," said Chris Rubio, a former long snapper at UCLA who now works as an instructor. "But if a long snapper screws up just once, he's the worst player in the world."

Mr. Purdum's backstory seems worthy of a Disney biopic. The son of a football coach, he recalled learning the fundamentals of solid snapping almost as soon as he could walk. His family moved around quite a bit as his father chased coaching jobs—between the fifth and eighth grades, Mr. Purdum said he attended five schools in three states—but football offered stability, and he excelled.

At Baker University, an NAIA school in Baldwin City, Kan., Mr. Purdum supplemented his long-snapping responsibilities by being the backup quarterback. He threw for one career touchdown, according to the school's sports-information department. (Asked where he ranks on the Jets' quarterback depth chart, Mr. Purdum said: "I'm the end-of-the-world scenario.")

After he graduated in 2007, professional scouts told him that he had excellent technique but lacked enough bulk to block NFL linemen. Mr. Purdum, who weighed 205 pounds his senior season, set about the long process of building up his body. He forced himself to consume upwards of 10,000 calories a day by devouring protein shakes and eggs by the dozen.

"Oh my God, if I have to smell another hard-boiled egg, I think I'd throw up," said Kara Purdum, his wife.

Mr. Purdum spent two years training, studying for a master's degree in education and working as an assistant coach, first at Avila University in Kansas City and then at Baker. He snapped to his wife in their backyard at night. She wore padded gloves.

"It can be hard to find people to train with," Mr. Purdum said. "Everyone thinks I'm nuts."

Before the start of last season, he had beefed up to 270 pounds, but no offers were forthcoming. So he fired his agent—"I told him to kiss it," he said—produced 128 DVDs that showcased his skills, and sent one to every general manager, head coach, special-teams coach and director of player personnel in the NFL. He got an extended look from the Kansas City Chiefs but was cut two days before their first preseason game. That one stung. He found work as a substitute teacher and began to look around for another coaching job.

"I think he was realistic," Kara Purdum said. "I think he had to at least consider that it might not work out."

But he continued to train, treading that fine line between dreams and delusions, and then, in January, the unexpected: He checked his cellphone during a lunch break and noticed that he had missed nine calls. One was from the Jets, who offered him a tryout. The team signed him on Feb. 5 and soon cut ties with James Dearth, who had been the team's long snapper since 2001. Mr. Purdum will make the rookie minimum, \$320,000, this season. Mr. Dearth was due to earn more than \$850,000.

"The way the game is set up, you try to get younger, cheaper players if you can," coach Rex Ryan said. "That's the harsh reality."

Mike Westhoff, the Jets' special teams coach, assessed Mr. Purdum as "a gigantic work in progress." Even though Mr. Westhoff said Mr. Purdum has top-notch mechanics, he needs to continue to get stronger to hold his own against bigger linemen. He has a three-year deal with the team, but nothing is guaranteed. "More like a three-hour deal," Mr. Westhoff said.

He has a nice rapport with Mr. Folk and Steve Weatherford, the Jets' punter. They depend on each other. Mr. Folk said his success hinges on Mr. Purdum.

"He has to be so precise," Mr. Folk said, "or precise enough that it doesn't mess with the kicker's rhythm or the holder's rhythm."

Earlier in his career, Mr. Weatherford worked with a couple of long snappers who were getting older, and he could tell that age was eating away at their velocity. It made his job as a holder more difficult. "If they're slower, I have to be faster," he said.

Mr. Purdum not only snaps with speed—his ball whistles to Mr. Weatherford at roughly 42.6 miles per hour on punts, covering 15 yards in 0.72 second—but also with accuracy. Mr. Purdum's snaps on field goals and point-after attempts are so consistent that Mr. Weatherford said he rarely needs to spin the laces even an inch or two to set the ball up for Mr. Folk.

It is a science. Mr. Westhoff thinks so much of the position that he taught his son, John, how to long-snap. John Westhoff, who was 6-foot-3 and 220 pounds during his playing days, won two Ivy League titles with the University of Pennsylvania. "He was an excellent college snapper," Mike Westhoff said. "If he were a little bit bigger, I'd probably bring him in here."

Mr. Purdum's job appears safe for now—John Westhoff is in law school at Indiana University—and he said he feels as if his spot on the team validates all of his hard work.

All he can do is take it one snap at a time, and hope nobody notices him.

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