

Allen Eyes High Road UW's Mike Allen Is Confident He Has Put Past Kicking Problems Behind.

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University of Wisconsin sophomore Mike Allen will be the first to admit there is nothing complex about being a kicker.

"You don't have to think about kicking; it's an easy thing to do," Allen said. "It's the easiest job on the field, I think."

Sometimes, a kicker can think too much.

That's what happened to Allen in the spring game. After a strong spring, things fell apart when he missed three field-goal attempts from 34 yards or less.

"After a couple of misses, coach (Barry) Alvarez asked me, 'What's going on?'" Allen said. "I said, 'Coach, I don't know.'" That was obviously a bad answer.

"I didn't know at the time. I got to go back and look at things and I realized my steps were off. I was thinking too much."

Like a golfer with a trusted swing coach, Allen went back to the person who knows his kicking style better than anyone else, Baltimore Ravens special teams coach Gary Zauner.

Allen got to know Zauner, a former special teams coach for the Minnesota Vikings, at a kicking camp at UW-River Falls and the two became friends.

One look at Allen's form at the camp this summer and Zauner knew something was wrong. Zauner noticed that Allen, a former hurdler in high school, hunched over at the shoulders as he was kicking the ball. It was similar to the motion of a hurdler when he lifts his leg to go over a hurdle.

"I was seeing if I could get more power in the ball, but overall I was getting less power because I was straining my back," Allen said.

Zauner had Allen move a few steps away from the ball, without pacing off his steps, then turn his back. Allen played soccer his whole life and Zauner told him to turn around, run up and kick the ball, like it was a soccer ball, without thinking.

"He said, 'Look, Mike, you have the athletic talent so just do that,'" Allen said. "That's what I worked on and it helped a lot."

The results were evident in training camp, as Allen seemed to have a slight edge over sophomore Adam Espinoza and junior college transfer Scott Campbell for the field-goal job.

Although Alvarez did not reveal which way he was leaning as camp closed, Allen looked to be slightly more consistent. Allen could at least handle the shorter field-goal assignments, with the more-powerful Campbell doing kickoffs and possibly longer field goals.

Allen made four of his first five field-goal attempts in the first three games last year as a true freshman walk-on. The only miss was a 46-yarder that was blocked at Oregon.

Then he missed two field-goal attempts in the fourth game at Penn State, one of which was blocked, and also had an extra-point attempt blocked.

"I feel confident in him," Alvarez said. "He kicked very well for us, right up until the Penn State game. Then it got a little overwhelming for him. I'd be surprised if he doesn't become a very consistent kicker for us."

Allen lost his job to Mark Neuser and never got it back. "I just had a bad game," Allen said.

"Things caught up to me. Maybe it was the whole hype of everything. You just don't really notice it and before I knew it Mark Neuser was kicking ahead of me and I was the second guy.

"I was getting all frustrated and letting it get to me. I shouldn't have let it get to me. I've just got to fight back and get better."

Allen spent all spring working on his low trajectory, which is still a problem at times.

Campbell gets the ball up more quickly, but many of his kicks have been odd-looking "knuckle balls." Espinoza might be kicking better than ever before, but still may not be as consistent as Allen.

The player that wins the job for the first game will have to kick well to keep it. That's fine with Allen, who said the competition **is** bringing out the best in everybody.

"It's just like last year," Allen said. "I had to keep kicking well to keep the job. I didn't kick well and Mark Neuser took over right away. That's going to be the situation all year. But all three of us are ready for it, whoever gets the job."