

New Coach Making Special Teams Sing

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When Dennis Green was the head coach at Stanford University, he was looking to improve his special teams. ***He interviewed a guy named Gary Zauner, who had worked for George Allen at Long Beach State.***

Green, who had coached special teams for the San Francisco 49ers in 1979, liked Zauner's philosophy, his approach to special teams. But before Green could add him to his staff, he left Stanford to become coach of the Vikings.

Green and Zauner kept in touch, though, and when the Vikings were looking for a special teams coach earlier this year, Green called his friend. By then, Zauner, a former kicker at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, had started his own consulting business, working with a variety of NFL and college teams looking to improve their special teams play.

"I told him, 'Coach, I'm not looking for a job anymore,'" Zauner recalled telling Green. "But if there was one person in the NFL I'd like to work for, it would be you."

Green, of course, was undaunted. Using all his persuasive skills, he talked to Zauner for 45 minutes and convinced him to come in for an interview. By the end of the hourlong interview, Zauner was hooked; he started work in January.

Seven months later, he is busy installing a system he and Green hope will help the Vikings rebound from last season, when they struggled in almost every phase of special teams. Beset with injuries to key players such as Jake Reed, Ronnie West and Ed McDaniel, they ranked last in the league in kickoff-return coverage, giving up a whopping 24.5 yards per kickoff, 13th in the NFC in punt-return coverage, giving up 12.2 yards per return, and they were the only NFC team to allow a kickoff and a punt to be returned for a touchdown.

Punter Harry Newsome, cut at least in part because of his \$450,000 salary, averaged 42.9 yards per punt, sixth best in the NFC. Kicker Fuad Reveiz, bothered by injuries, made 74.3 percent of his field goals, ninth best in the NFC. Reveiz was a perfect 22 of 22 up to 39 yards, but he was 3 of 7 between 40 and 49 yards and 1 of 6 at 50 yards or more. He made 27 of 28 extra points, and his 105 points ranked him seventh in NFC scoring.

The Vikings ranked 12th in the NFC in punt returns with a 7.2-yard average, although rookie Eric Guliford ranked 10th among NFC returners with a 7.3 average. The team averaged 19.7 yards per kickoff return, though rookie Qadry Ismail ranked seventh in the NFC with a 21.5 average.

"We were a little bit inconsistent as far as some of our coverage," Green said generously. "We did some real good things, too. It wasn't like the entire year we didn't play well. We just were inconsistent."

Nonetheless, Green fired special teams coach Tom Batta after the season and brought in Zauner.

"What we totally believe in is change until you get it right," Green said. "I'm not a big believer in working the same scheme just because it's what you've done before."

"Zauner's schemes are different, all right. It's almost as if he has elevated special teams to a science. His basic philosophies are simple, however.

``My general philosophy has always been to be very aggressive," said Zauner, an advocate of blocks, fakes and trick plays. ``But basically, it's just a matter of putting the right players in the right spots."

Zauner looks for more hitting and more speed on his unit, and he likes to use linebackers, safeties and tight ends to get the job done. That's good news for players such as linebacker Greg Manusky and tight end Brent Novoselsky, who pride themselves on special teams play.

Novoselsky was asked what makes a good special teams player.

``Scouts can't pick 'em, because it takes a big heart, and that's one thing scouts don't put on their little sheets and test," Novoselsky said, smiling. ``It's sheer want to. Wanting to get to the ball. Wanting to make plays. That's all it is."

In addition to putting together coverage and return teams, Zauner also is tinkering with the kicking game.

The Vikings brought in Bryan Barker, an excellent directional punter, because Zauner likes to cut down the amount of the field opponents have to use. Also, Zauner said he was helping Reveiz correct a slight alignment problem. Similar adjustments, Zauner said, helped Phoenix's Greg Davis improve his accuracy from 50 to 79 percent.

Generally, the players have been receptive to Zauner's ideas. But the real test will come when the season starts.

``It doesn't matter how good it looks on paper, it's what you do on the field," Manusky said. ``Basically it's up to the players to go out there and compete and make plays happen. Any time you have one play that involves 40 to 50 yards of open field, either you're going to make a big play out of it or a big play could go against you. You just hope you make more big plays than they do."