

Unseen, But At Center Of It All

Article from: USA Today

Article date: November 25, 2004

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In the upside-down world of NFL long snappers, 13-year veteran Kendall Gammon of the Kansas City Chiefs has made a career of tossing backward passes between his legs.

Although listed as a Chiefs tight end, same as Pro Bowler [Tony Gonzalez](#), Gammon snaps on punts, field goals and extra points. The only tight end the 36-year-old plays is in practice on the scout team, simulating opponents.

"If I couldn't deep snap, I wouldn't have been in this league," says the 6-4, 255-pounder. "About the only thing [Tony Gonzalez](#) and I have in common is we're carbon-based forms of life. "

But Gammon has a special skill, like [Mike Bartrum](#) of the Philadelphia Eagles who once, for TV, snapped a football into a basketball hoop from half court. Or like the Seattle Seahawks' Jean-Phillippe Darche, a Canadian who put medical school on hold to snap for pay. Or like the Houston Texans' [Bryan Pittman](#), who chased his NFL dream through semipro ball, odd jobs and injuries.

Although there were long snapping specialists decades ago, most used to be backups at other positions. In the past decade, nearly all have become as specialized as punters and kickers. Half the teams just list the position as "LS."

Center [Adam Treu](#) of the Oakland Raiders is the only NFL starter still long snapping. A few snappers have other roles. During the 2003 and 2004 seasons, [Jeff Robinson](#) of the Dallas Cowboys had four touchdowns on four catches as a third tight end; Bartrum has a touchdown as Philadelphia's third tight end this year.

But most just snap, maybe 10-15 plays a game.

"The most important guy in special teams (with the kicking game) is the long snapper," says Gary Zauner, special teams coordinator for the Baltimore Ravens. Zauner formerly guided the Minnesota Vikings' special teams under Dennis Green, now head coach of the Arizona Cardinals.

"Like Denny Green told me, 'The most important thing is when it's fourth down. ... I don't have to worry about a bad snap, that the punter should get it off and the kicker should kick it,' " Zauner says. "Any great kicker loves when you get a great snapper because it's almost like you don't even have a snap."

Even if long snappers can play other positions, many coaches won't risk having them injured.

"Guys are being drafted who are pure long snappers. That was something I never saw before," says Kevin Gold of Harrisburg, Pa., agent for snappers Rob Davis of Green Bay, [Justin Snow](#) of Indianapolis and Pittman of Houston.

Seven current NFL snappers have been drafted since 1998: four in the seventh and final round, two in the sixth and one in the fifth.

An NFL Players Association report says the average salary for long snappers this season is \$645,928. Most make near the minimum, but an NFL veteran of four to six seasons is assured \$535,000 annually.

"Most snappers make more than I do," Zauner says.

No wonder Gold says wannabees regularly contact his Web site, Longsnap.com (distinct from Longsnapper.com of Chicago Bears' snapper [Patrick Mannelly](#)).

"I get e-mails four, five times a week from guys who played college football in the mid to late '90s, who say, 'I watch the games on Sunday. I know I can do a better job,' " Gold says. "It's the one position in the NFL most people say, 'I can do this,' not realizing what goes into it."

In college, long snappers can't be hit until one second after the snap. The NFL has no such rule. "The job description of the NFL deep snapper is to get the crap knocked out of you," Gammon says.

Paid to be anonymous

The typical NFL long snapper is a former college lineman, linebacker or tight end, weighing 245-250 pounds or more. He must block after snaps and cover punts.

But making fast, accurate and consistent snaps is the real test.

"It's a blessing when they can block and a real cherry on the cake if they can run down and cover," Zauner says. "But in the order of most important, it's snapping."

The trend is specialization.

Coaches measure snap speeds in tenths of a second. As a general rule, a 15-yard punt snap must get to the punter's hip in no more than eight-tenths of a second. If it's slow or off target, there's risk of a block.

The snap on field goals and extra points is 7 yards. Coaches time from snap to kick, and 1.3 seconds or faster is a general rule.

With his dominant hand, a snapper grips the ball like a quarterback, fingers over laces. The other hand is used for guidance.

Ideally on place kicks, the ball reaches the holder with laces facing away so he doesn't have to get the laces out for the kicker. Gammon wants his ball to rotate 3 1/2 times on its way to the holder.

"You do it so much it's not really something you have to think about. ... It's not worrying about what that guy over you is going to do after you snap," Pittman says.

Do it correctly, as Gammon demonstrates in his video, **SnapRight**, and you are just another backside at the line of scrimmage.

San Diego Chargers snapper [David Binn](#) has created some buzz amid reports he is dating former **Baywatch** star Pamela Anderson.

But the only way most snappers get noticed is when they botch one.

"In Major League Baseball, three out of 10 is pretty good at home plate. But nine out of 10 (snapping) is going to get you beat," says former Buffalo Bills coach Marv Levy.

Levy once gave former Buffalo snapper Adam Lingner a game ball for "something like his 500th consecutive accurate snap." Levy hiked the ball to Lingner snapper-style.

"You never hear about these guys until they do something wrong," Levy says.

Such was the case in the New York Giants' Jan. 5, 2003, playoff loss to the San Francisco 49ers.

[Trey Junkin](#), who had been retired for two seasons after 19 years as an NFL snapper, had just been signed at 41 by the Giants to replace an injured snapper. His bad snap with seconds left kept the Giants from

getting off a try for a winning field goal in a 39-38 loss.

"That will be with me to the day that I die," Junkin says.

Getting started

Typically, long snappers have good hands — and good arms.

Gammon is a skilled juggler, whether with bowling balls or machetes. He has juggled since he was a teenager, but he didn't long snap until his third year as an offensive lineman at Pittsburg (Kan.) State.

"I was just trying it and realized I could do it a little bit. ... It just kind of snowballed," he says.

Bartrum of the Eagles, an 11-year NFL vet, was a high school quarterback. Although he became a tight end at Marshall University, he also lettered as a baseball relief pitcher.

While rehabbing a knee at Marshall, he started snapping on the advice of assistant coach Greg Briner. "He is always getting 'thank yous' from me," Bartrum says.

Darche, a five-year veteran with Seattle, started snapping in ninth grade and continued through his five-year career as a linebacker at McGill University in Montreal.

He spent his final two seasons at McGill in medical school, then left to play for the Toronto Argonauts of the Canadian Football League. He got a tryout with Seattle in February 2000. The previous November he had broken his leg in a CFL game and hadn't been snapping. He had never used an NFL ball, slimmer than a CFL ball.

"I'm like, 'This is actually easier than the CFL ball. You've got a better grip on it,' " he says. "They flew me in on a six-hour flight for about 30 snaps, maybe a half-hour workout, and offered me a contract."

Med school remains on hold.

Then there is Houston's Pittman. "Most snappers have an amazing story. ... His may take the cake," says Gold, his agent.

After two seasons as a tight end/snapper at Walla Walla (Wash.) Community College, Pittman snapped as a 1997 walk-on at the University of Washington but left because he got no scholarship. In two semipro seasons with the Puget Sound (Wash.) Jets, he did odd jobs. "You name it," he says. "Bouncing, personal training, security work."

One semipro season, he broke his hand and injured a knee and did "a lot of painting and yard work."

In March 2003, he paid his way to a special teams scouting combine in Reno. He landed a tryout with the Cleveland Browns and didn't make the last cut, but he got another shot with Houston a week before its inaugural 2003 season.

"On Friday, it was decision time," Pittman says. "They decided to go with me."

Getting it done

In Oakland, Treu doesn't have to hustle onto the field for snaps. He is the Raiders' starting center.

"I don't find it that trying," he says, adding that in cold weather it helps him stay loose for snapping.

But Philadelphia's Bartrum, recalling how taxing it was when he was an injury sub at tight end against Detroit this season, says of Treu: "That's hard to do. My hat goes off to him."

Gammon has played in 202 consecutive games, longest active streak for a non-kicker. Green Bay

quarterback [Brett Favre](#) has played in 201 in a row.

"That's probably one of the few times you're going to see Brett and I mentioned in the same sentence," Gammon says.

Snappy bunch — each team's snapper

American Football Conference

Baltimore: Joe Maese — 6-0, 245, New Mexico, fourth season, listed as long snapper. Sixth-round draft pick in 2001, snapping ace as non-scholarship player in college.

Buffalo: Jon Dorenbos — 6-0, 245, Texas-El Paso, second season, long snapper. Professional magician has performed sleight of hand at Buffalo charity events and in Las Vegas.

Cincinnati: Brad St. Louis — 6-3, 247, Southwest Missouri State, fifth season, long snapper-tight end. Seventh-round draft pick in 2000. Missouri high school wrestling champ.

Cleveland: Ryan Pontbriand — 6-2, 255, Rice, second season, long snapper. Fifth-round draft pick in 2003. Degree in mechanical engineering.

Denver: Mike Leach — 6-2, 245, William & Mary, fifth season, tight end. Former collegiate punter-tight end. Didn't take up snapping until he turned pro.

Houston: Bryan Pittman — 6-3, 275, Washington, second season, long snapper. One season of major college football as walk-on snapper at Washington; also played semipro.

Indianapolis: Justin Snow — 6-3, 240, Baylor, fifth season, tight end. Four-year letterman as defensive end at Baylor, where snapping caught eye of the Colts scouts.

Jacksonville: Joe Zelenka — 6-3, 270, Wake Forest, sixth season, tight end-long snapper. Has the Joe Z Fan Club.

Kansas City: Kendall Gammon — 6-4, 255, Pittsburg (Kan.) State, 13th season, tight end. Part owner of the Paradise Nursery garden center in Kansas City.

Miami: Ed Perry — 6-4, 265, James Madison, ninth season, tight end. Tight end in early years with the Dolphins; caught one TD pass from Dan Marino in 1997, another in 1999.

New England: Lonie Paxton — 6-2, 260, Sacramento State, fifth season, long snapper. Made a snow angel after Adam Vinatieri's winning field goal vs. Oakland in the 2001 playoffs.

New York Jets: James Dearth — 6-4, 270, Tarleton (Texas) State, fourth season, tight end-long snapper. Switched in college from quarterback to tight end.

Oakland: Adam Treu — 6-5, 300, Nebraska, eighth season, center. Starting center; only regular starter in NFL doing long snapping. All-state high school baseball pitcher in Nebraska.

Pittsburgh: Mike Schneck — 6-1, 237, Wisconsin, sixth season, long snapper. Three-year letterman at Wisconsin, where he had only one bad snap, a week after he dislocated an elbow.

San Diego: David Binn — 6-3, 223, California, 11th season, long snapper. Longest tenured current Charger.

Tennessee: Ken Amato — 6-2, 245, Montana State, second season, long snapper-linebacker. Focused on snapping while recovering from a knee injury as a junior college linebacker.

National Football Conference

Arizona: Nathan Hodel — 6-2, 249, Illinois, third season, long snapper. Standout high school baseball pitcher in Illinois.

Atlanta: Derek Rackley — 6-4, 250, Minnesota, fifth season, tight end. Only NFL reception has been a 1-yard TD catch from Michael Vick in 2001.

Carolina: Jason Kyle — 6-3, 242, Arizona State, 10th season, linebacker. Two-year starter as linebacker at Arizona State; 20 tackles vs. Miami (Fla.) as a senior.

Chicago: Patrick Mannelly — 6-5, 265, Duke, seventh season, tackle-long snapper. Sixth-round pick in 1998 draft. Has a Web site, Longsnapper.com. Married to daughter of former baseball pitcher Tommy John.

Dallas: Jeff Robinson — 6-4, 250, Idaho, 12th season, tight end. Two TDs on two catches last season; two TDs on two catches this season.

Detroit: Don Muhlbach — 6-4, 256, Texas A&M, first season, long snapper. Cut by Baltimore during preseason but signed by Lions on Nov. 9 to replace injured Jody Littleton.

Green Bay: Rob Davis — 6-3, 283, Shippensburg (Pa.), ninth season, long snapper. Cut by the Jets (twice), Kansas City and Chicago before joining the Packers in 1994.

Minnesota: Cullen Loeffler — 6-5, 241, Texas, first season, long snapper. Son of former U.S. Rep. Tom Loeffler.

New Orleans: Kevin Houser — 6-2, 252, Ohio State, fifth season, long snapper. Seventh-round pick in 2000 draft. His Life's a Snap foundation benefits cancer patients at Children's Hospital of New Orleans.

New York Giants: Ryan Kuehl — 6-5, 290, Virginia, eighth season, long snapper. Avid golfer and member of Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Md.

Philadelphia: Mike Bartrum — 6-4, 245, Marshall, 11th season, tight end-long snapper. Four TDs on six career receptions; two catches and one TD this season.

St. Louis: Chris Massey — 6-0, 235, Marshall, third season, running back-long snapper. Seventh round pick in 2002 draft. One of two NFL snappers from Marshall (other is Philadelphia's Bartrum).

San Francisco: Brian Jennings — 6-5, 245, Arizona State, fifth season, tight end/long snapper. Seventh-round pick in 2000 draft. Signed six-year, \$4.86 million deal this year.

Seattle: Jean-Philippe Darche — 6-0, 246, McGill, fifth season, long snapper. Co-captain three seasons as linebacker at McGill University in Montreal.

Tampa Bay: Dave Moore — 6-5, 250, Pittsburgh, 13th season, tight end. Veteran tight end who returned this season for a second stint in Tampa, mostly as a long snapper.

Washington: Ethan Albright — 6-5, 265, North Carolina, 10th season, long snapper. Nicknamed "The Red Snapper" because of his hair.