

Kicked Back

As Frost Flails, Packers Castoff Hits His Stride

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Article by: Bob McGinn

Punter Jon Ryan is becoming for the Seattle Seahawks everything that the Green Bay Packers hoped he would become but were so impatient and rigid that it never happened.

As Derrick Frost's poor season as the successor to Ryan drags on, scrutiny shifts onto the Packers for their decisions not only to waive Ryan on Sept. 1 but also to discourage him from working with an outside kicking specialist.

Perhaps the strongest-legged punter in team history, Ryan entered 2008 as the National Football League's third-ranked active punter with a 44.5-yard gross average. But Ryan, who came to Green Bay as a Canadian Football League free agent in March 2006, recognized there were areas of his game that needed refinement.

His agent, Gil Scott of Toronto, suggested that Ryan spend a few days during the off-season working with Gary Zauner, the Milwaukee native and NFL special-teams coach for 13 seasons who now serves as an independent kicking consultant in Arizona.

"I said to Jon, 'It's like getting an oil change for a car. Every once in a while you need a little tuneup,' " Scott said Friday. "I said, 'This is a guy who is a professional kicking coach that I've got a lot of respect for. I think he can help you.'

"Jon's pretty quiet. I talked about going in the spring. He said, 'Oh, I couldn't go there. They don't want me to go.' "

About three days after being cut by the Packers, Ryan flew to Phoenix for two days of work with Zauner. A couple days after that, Ryan had an impressive tryout for the Seahawks and was signed to replace Ryan Plackemeier.

"Let's just say he was more confident when he went up to Seattle for his workout," Scott said. "I know he felt very good coming out of there."

Zauner's Web site includes testimonials from many kickers whom he has coached or tutored over the years, including Frost for the Baltimore Ravens in 2003. Ryan agreed to do one after finishing with Zauner.

"'Coach' has probably taught me more in the last two days than any other coach in two or three years," Ryan said in a short video. Ryan didn't return a phone message Friday.

After a so-so start, Ryan has been one of the few bright spots in Seattle, ranking seventh in the NFL in gross average (46.4) and 14th in net average (37.9).

"He's done really well," said Will Lewis, the Seahawks' director of pro personnel. "He's got a big leg, he's athletic enough to field snaps that aren't great, he can hold and he works hard. He has a lot of good things."

Obviously, the Packers liked Ryan's leg. What the Packers didn't like was what they felt were

his slow get-off times and limited directional skill.

Those were some areas of Ryan's punting that he sought help from Zauner with. In Seattle, neither has been a problem.

"He consciously worked on it when he got here," Lewis said of get-off times. "It hasn't been an issue for us at all.

"Actually, he's done remarkably well inside the 20, and I don't think directional has always been his strong suit. On a couple occasions, it was more our gunner who didn't down it than him not putting it there."

Mike Stock, the Packers' third-year special teams coach, said he could not recall if Ryan ever asked him about working with a specialist.

"But let me say this about that, and not about him (Zauner)," Stock said at midweek. "I don't believe in those things, and I'll tell you why. One voice is the most important thing when you're coaching a team or a player. You can't have two different voices, especially long distance."

Former Packers kicker Dave Rayner used to work a portion of the off-season with Eddie Murray. Because Murray kicked successfully in the NFL, Stock said that was worthwhile.

Don't the specific skills required to punt make use of outside specialists appropriate?

"No," Stock said. "If you want to get into the discussion of, does this guy know more about punting than the other guy? Do you want to read my bio? I'm not promoting myself, but I know what I know and I know what I've done and I know the people I've worked with.

"It's a matter of, this is the guy who is coaching that position. And this is his philosophy and this is the team's philosophy, and that's the philosophy we'll follow."

Scott made the point that some special-teams coaches clearly are more knowledgeable about schemes than kicking technique.

"Because Zauner was a special-teams coach in Minnesota and Arizona (and Baltimore)," Scott said, "some special-teams coaches who aren't kicking specialists are paranoid about it."

Lewis, who scouted for the Packers from 1997-'99, said special-teams coaches who resist consultants would seem to have an ego problem.

"I've been around enough kickers to know that the special-teams coach may not be his greatest ally but the guy he worked with in the off-season on strength and technique might be the guy that helps him once he gets into the season," said Lewis.

"To me, a special-teams coach might not be a great kicking coach but he's smart enough to listen to some of the kicking experts. Most special-teams coaches are, like, 'Whatever can help my kickers.' "

In 2006, Ryan tied for eighth in gross average (44.5) but tied for just 26th in net average (35.7). His average hang time was 4.0 seconds.

Last year, his gross mark (44.4) ranked ninth and his net average of 37.6, the best by a Packer since Donny Anderson's 38.5 in 1969, ranked 12th. His average hang time was 4.22.

Stock was asked if he had done a good job developing Ryan.

"More than you know," he said. "Look at the first year to the second year. And he had never held before."

Now the Packers enter the time of the season when the ability to kick a stone-cold football makes leg strength even more paramount. Stock said he "wasn't going to argue that point at all," but also seemed to

suggest Ryan's hands weren't as clutch as Frost's in frigid weather.

Despite kicking in three domes and generally ideal weather, Frost is averaging just 42.0 gross and 36.4 net, which rank 25th and 24th and are close to his career marks.

"He knows he took a big stumble, a big fall flat on his face," said Stock, referring to the New Orleans game. "He's got to make sure that he reconciles that to the team. That was addressed (Wednesday) with the team."

Billed by general manager Ted Thompson and Stock as an effective directional punter, Frost ranks merely 28th in percentage of punts inside the 20 (18.2%). Ryan ranks 26th at 23.3%. Also, Frost ranks 22nd in touchback percentage (11.4%), but Ryan is even worse, at 29th (18.3%).

With little to choose from among "street" free agents, the Packers just hope that Frost, a fine holder for Mason Crosby, can make it through the season.

"We're trying to make this right for this situation," Stock said. "He needs to wake up. I think he not only has the leg, he has the fundamentals. What he has to do is cut it loose."