

Special Teams a Rare Breed

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So, just what does it take to be on the Bears' special teams?

"You have to be crazy," said Danny Abramowicz.

He ought to know. You see, Abramowicz was an outstanding special teams player during his nine-year NFL career with New Orleans and San Francisco. And, natch, he was crazy.

"That's why I have all these store-bought teeth," Abramowicz said with a smile that is a monument to porcelain. "I used to have crooked teeth, but I had to get them all capped."

But don't think a little dentistry or turning 47 last July straightened out anything more than Abramowicz's teeth.

"I think I'm crazy," said the Bears' new special teams coach, "but smart enough to know you can't go out of control, that you have to stay within your means. Anger is good, but you have to turn it into positive energy."

In other words, "smart crazy."

"You can't be a village idiot, running around everywhere out there with your head up your (rear), flying around not knowing where you're going," Abramowicz said. "We want to fly around with intelligence, always thinking. Get knocked down, get up, get moving."

But it starts with being crazy, especially the guys on the kickoff team who have to break the wedge.

"Certain guys have to go into the wedge," Abramowicz said. "That's just the way it is. Now, you have to be a little cuckoo to do it, but someone has to. A guy who has to go break into the wedge has to believe in himself, believe in the Bears and believe in me."

They believe, they believe.

Abramowicz represents the Bears' new commitment to improving special teams play that head coach Mike Ditka has made a priority this season. And, just in case anyone missed the point, Ditka had Abramowicz deliver the opening night speech when the players checked into Platteville, Wis., for the start of training camp in July.

Reason is, special teams - or, more appropriately, not-so-special teams - cost the Bears several games last season. They blew a sure victory over Miami because of a snap that sailed over punter Maury Buford's head, then messed up another punt play in that forgettable 17-13 first-round playoff loss to Dallas that ended their season.

Less than two weeks later, Abramowicz was brought in to replace Steve Kazor, who became tight ends coach. What the Bears get in Abramowicz is one of the best receivers in NFL history (371 catches, 5,704 yards, 39 TDs) despite a career spent mostly with some bad Saints teams. They also get one of the best special teams players the league has seen, something that got the immediate attention of Bears players.

"I think Dan brings with him a lot of respect that he's gotten from playing," said Glen Kozlowski, a respected special teams player himself. "He's been an All-Pro wide receiver and played special teams. I

think guys have a tendency to listen more because they say, 'This guy's done it. He knows what he's talking about.'"

Which means he was crazy.

"He was a nut case," Kozlowski said. "He's still a little nuts."

But he's enthusiastic, dynamic and demanding. And his first demands, by the way, were made of Ditka. Abramowicz took the job with the understanding that he would get the necessary time and coaching help he needed to make the special teams a success. Fine, Ditka said.

"I brought in a kicking specialist (Gary Zauner) to work with the kickers," Abramowicz said. "We have a coach working downfield with the return people. We have a coach working with the line. The players see how much attention we're giving it. They see how important it is."

So important, in fact, that Abramowicz also told Ditka he needed to stock his special teams with players who normally start on offense and defense. Fine again, Ditka said.

"You can be the greatest Xs and Os man in the world," Abramowicz said, "but you have to have some starters involved. You have to have a core group, then you have to have some starters."

But no matter who lines up for the kicking and return teams, they have to have what Abramowicz calls a "want-to-ness."

"You have to have it in your heart," he said. "I can draw all sorts of pretty lines and I can tell the guys, 'This is what you have to do.' But if you really don't want to do it, it won't happen."

"Now, how do Koz and (Maurice) Douglass (the outside release men on punts and kickoffs) get down the field all the time? I studied the film. If you put it into a computer, where would those guys be in the pack as far as guys running on the outside. It's sheer running ability. They wouldn't be near the top. But they have sheer want-to-ness to get down there and do it."

That's what Abramowicz is selling - "want-to-ness." And the Bears are buying it.

"I've always taken it personally," Kozlowski said. "When I'm on the field, I don't have friends. I've lined up against my best friends from grade school and we've been in a fistfight halfway through the game. But that's what I'm paid to do. I'm paid to beat the guy across from me."

"Special teams is about as basic as football goes. You line up and it's whoever's tougher."

Or crazier.