

An Abundance of Good Legs / Buford, Gardocki Going Toe-to-Toe

Article from: Chicago Sun-Times

Article Date: August 7, 1992

Author: Dan Pompei

PLATTEVILLE, Wis. Suddenly the Bears find themselves with more great legs than a chorus line.

And it's going to make for one difficult decision when it comes to choosing which kicker will be let go.

Field goal man Kevin Butler is assured of one roster spot, but Maury Buford and Chris Gardocki are in a battle for the punting job.

In one corner, the Bears have Buford, a 32-year-old veteran of nine NFL seasons. He knows the Soldier Field winds, he's playoff tested and he doesn't have an enemy on earth. Furthermore, he's punting better than ever.

In the other corner, the Bears have Gardocki, a 22-year-old hotshot in his second professional year. What you see is only a fraction of what you might eventually get. His foot is electric, and he can kick field goals and kick off as well as punt. Gardocki, too, is punting as well as ever.

In the early rounds, Buford holds a slight edge. Coach Mike Ditka said Buford's hang times have been a tad better than Gardocki's.

Kicking specialist Gary Zauner, hired as a temporary consultant, said Buford has been a little more consistent. But he believes both will be on NFL rosters this fall.

"The whole thing with kicking is consistency," Ditka said. "It's foolish for a guy to go out and average 49 yards one week and 38 yards the next. That's what we don't want to have happen."

To Bears coaches, hang time is more meaningful than distance. Special teams coach Danny Abramowicz told his punters he would take a 40-yard punt that stays in the air 4.5 seconds every time.

"Danny said he could keep his job indefinitely if he could get a punter to do that," Buford said.

Buford has been doing that, and agrees with Ditka this is the best he's ever punted. Buford says it's about confidence.

"Gary told me some basic things I never realized," Buford said. "I just wish Gary Zauner would have been around 10 years ago."

Gardocki also praises Zauner for instilling new confidence in him.

One of the tricks in Zauner's bag is positive reinforcement. But there are many others.

At the behest of Abramowicz, Zauner converted Gardocki and Buford into two-step punters from three-step punters. It was an easier adjustment for Gardocki.

To make the transition more comfortable for Buford, Zauner suggested he take a "dip step" backward first, then two steps. The result is Buford's rhythm doesn't change.

The likelihood of a punt being blocked does change. Three-step punters cover up to five yards with their strides; two-steppers take only three and a half. Two steps also take less time.

The punters have been spending more time working on details than ever before. They have practiced directional punts, pooch punts, punts into the wind, punts from deep in the end zone, punts after high and low snaps and what to do after a block.

"We've tried to cover every situation that can be covered," Zauner said.

The other factor that plays into the equation is competition. Both know they have to punt well because of the other, but Buford said he has no problem keeping his eyes on his own work because he doesn't view it as a one-on-one confrontation.

"Maybe the competition makes you concentrate a little more on every single kick," Buford said. "In the past if you didn't have competition, you might mentally waver from time to time."

The competition should bring out the best in Buford because he might have to punt considerably better than Gardocki to to beat him out.

Management has at least three reasons to prefer Gardocki: He's younger, he can kick off and be a backup field goal kicker and they spent a third-round pick on him.

Pertaining to Gardocki's advantage in years, Ditka said, "I think the guy who's doing the best job has to stay, realizing the younger guy probably will be able to do it longer. But I don't know if it's fair to say that. If the other guy can do the job right now, you must seize the moment in life."

Gardocki's kickoff abilities give him a tangible advantage, especially on a team that has had kickoff problems. In college, 22 of Gardocki's 66 kickoffs resulted in touchbacks.

But he hasn't been practicing his kickoffs to a great extent this camp. When Gardocki tried to be a full-time punter, field goal kicker and kickoff man last training camp, he wound up with a groin pull that ruined his season.

"I'm kicking a good bit, but not like last year," Gardocki said. "I'm concentrating on not overkicking."