

Chris Sailer Kicking & Rubio Long Snapping

Featured Article

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Guru of the Long Snap

BY SCOTT CACCIOLA

AUBURN, Mass. — Chris Rubio was dissecting the art of long snapping for the benefit of 23 teenagers and their parents on an unseasonably cool morning last month. He used words like “balance” and “extension” as he dabbled in the minutiae of a craft that he considers a science.



Chris Rubio demonstrated how to hold the ball in one of his drills and coached a player on his grip. Samantha Alyn Goresh for The New York Times.

“What’s he going to do after this?” Rubio asked his audience as one of his campers demonstrated the proper technique for hiking a football between his legs at an alarmingly high rate of speed. “He’s going to sit down on the toilet. There it is. Oh, this is gorgeous.”

Rubio, 38, who has a goatee and the stocky build of a steamer trunk, is one of the country's foremost instructors of an unusual skill. He spends a good chunk of the year traveling the country to stage clinics like this one at Auburn High School, just outside of Worcester, Mass., where he preached the gospel of long snapping to young players whose abilities are being valued by college coaches now more than ever. "Try sleeping the night before a game without one," said Paul Chryst, the coach at Pittsburgh.

Long snappers have exactly one job: snap the ball on extra points, field goals and punts. And while a long snapper will never win the Heisman Trophy, the role is a trapeze act. The only time anyone notices a snap is when it rockets past the punter or the holder. Anything short of a 100 percent success rate is catastrophic. The very best long snappers, though, can send the ball spiraling in a sharp arc at 52 miles per hour.

"A coach once told me that long snapping is like brain surgery," Rubio said during a quiet moment at his camp, a daylong affair that included on-field instruction, a recruiting seminar and film analysis. "As long as everything goes right, you're good. You mess up one time, you're dead."

Not so long ago, college coaches would not have dreamed of putting long snappers on full scholarship. A lineman could moonlight at the position. Why waste a scholarship on a long snapper? Conventional wisdom was that coaches were better off recruiting an extra quarterback, or three.

The landscape has changed. Paul Johnson, the coach at Georgia Tech, cited the redshirt sophomore Sean Tobin as the first long snapper he had ever signed to a scholarship out of high school. Johnson knew he would eventually need a replacement for Tyler Morgan, and he could not afford to gamble.

"A bad snap can change the game faster than anything," Johnson said in a recent interview.

Boston College Coach Steve Addazio said innovative punting schemes had also underscored the position's importance. More teams have adopted spread formations that put a premium on having a long snapper who can sprint downfield and help cover the return.

"You need a guy who can snap well but is also an athlete," Addazio said. "It's a field-position game. The fewer return yards you give up, the better your starting position is. The better your starting position is, the better chance you have to score."

Rubio, a former long snapper at U.C.L.A., began his business about 10 years ago with Chris Sailer, his best friend from college. Sailer was the team's place-kicker, so the two have always been especially close. At last month's camp, Sailer instructed his kickers and punters on one side of the field while Rubio used the other. Rubio was prone to describing Sailer's students as morons, though it was a calculated move.

"Rubio does a good job of making long snappers feel important," said Clayton Jackson, a Rubio acolyte from Cottonwood Falls, Kan. (population: 903), where he is a senior at Chase County High School. "Before I got involved, you just felt like you were on your

own. You didn't know there were other people who did it. You didn't know there were people who were supportive."

Rubio is known simply as Rubio. He does not respond to "Chris." (Even his wife calls him Rubio.) His obsession with long snapping is such that he never watches games live on television, he said. Instead, he records them so he can scan them in three minutes. He skips ahead a lot.

"Fourth down, fourth down, fourth down," he said.

The ideal long snapper, Rubio said, has long arms and a substantial backside.

"Look at that big old butt," Rubio said of one camper. "All the power comes from the butt. Boom!"

With college scholarships suddenly available, the secret is out: being a good long snapper, or even an adequate one, can pay off. Enter Rubio, who is something of a power broker. Each camper receives a ranking, which Rubio posts on his Web site. Because long snapping is such an esoteric skill, many college coaches lean on Rubio's rankings as a primer for recruiting.

This is not something Rubio attempts to shield from his campers, or from their parents. In fact, he broadcasts it. While his camps are primarily about instruction, he said, they also provide an opportunity to get noticed by someone who has connections. "Maximum exposure," Rubio calls it. One parent asked Rubio if it was too late in the recruiting process for a college to offer a scholarship to his son, a senior.

"Absolutely not," Rubio said. "You're being seen by me now, and coaches are going off my lists."

Bill Vaughn, whose 14-year-old son, Jake, was attending his second Rubio camp in two weeks, found that other parents were frosty toward him until they learned that Jake was only a high school sophomore. He was not vying for a scholarship, at least not yet.

"After that, they opened up to me a little bit more," Bill Vaughn said.

Rubio said campers often asked how frequently they should see him. The short answer: there is no such thing as too much Rubio.

"Right after a lesson, I've got you all cleaned up," he said. "You're a big boat. I'm going to set you off to sea. The longer you wait to come back to me, the more barnacles and crap I need to clean off before I can add the flames and the new engines and stuff like that."

There is an economic side to the equation, of course. Long snapping is Rubio's livelihood, and he typically charges each of his campers about \$300 to attend his camps. Many of the boys who traveled to Auburn came from out of state, and the entire

enterprise can get expensive in a hurry. Rubio organizes roughly 35 camps over the course of the year. He also offers private lessons at his home in Lewiston, Idaho.

“When you go to a Rubio camp, you get Rubio,” Rubio said. “And that’s a big-time thing. If you’re paying top dollar, you better get Grade A meat.”

Rubio’s path to self-styled guru happened more or less by accident. As a teenager growing up outside Los Angeles, he was a quarterback until he reached high school. The problem, he said, was his size — specifically, the 270 pounds he was hauling around on his 6-foot-2 frame. His coach turned him into a lineman, but Rubio saw little action as a sophomore. He said he was not particularly enamored with his role or with his coach.

“He was a yeller,” Rubio said. “I’m not a yeller.”

The following summer, Rubio was throwing the football around when a friend decided to snap a few from 15 yards. Rubio tried it and liked it. He seemed to have a natural feel for the skill. He spent the next two seasons as his high school’s long snapper and drew mild interest from college coaches.

He enrolled at U.C.L.A., where he earned a spot on the team as a walk-on. Everything that Rubio understood about the position was self-taught, he said. He studied video and devised drills for himself in his dorm room. As a sophomore, Rubio began to wonder why Terry Donahue, the team’s head coach, had never said a word to him. Did Donahue even know his name? Rubio said he finally worked up the nerve to ask.

“Rubio,” Donahue told him, “if I never speak to you again, you’ve done a fine job.”

Donahue never spoke to him again, a fact Rubio regards as a point of pride.

These days, Rubio markets the entire Rubio experience as entree into the long-snapping fraternity. Each camper gets his e-mail address and cell phone number — “If I don’t respond right away, I’m either on a plane, sleeping or at a camp,” he said — along with an evaluation and that all-important ranking.

The country’s top-ranked senior, according to Rubio, is Tanner Carew, a 6-foot-2, 215-pound wizard from La Verne, Calif., who has orally committed to play at Oregon on a full scholarship. Carew said he had attended more Rubio camps than he could remember.

“Colleges look at his rankings,” Carew said in a telephone interview. “He knows people. I wouldn’t be in this position without him.”

Last month’s camp concluded with an accuracy contest. The finals pitted Jackson against Zach Hubbard, a 6-foot-5, 240-pound senior from Tampa, Fla., who had arrived that day hoping to improve his Rubio ranking. Hubbard said his goal was to use long snapping to enhance his college choices and then parlay it into a career.

"I want to make \$800,000 doing nothing in the N.F.L.," he said.

After ousting Jackson, Hubbard was happy to settle for a Camp Champion T-shirt. Rubio was off to his next stop in Chicago.

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