

Chris Sailer Kicking & Rubio Long Snapping

Featured Article

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Lines growing long at long-snapping camps

BY DOUG WILLIAMS | ESPN.COM



Chris Rubio, right, a former long snapper at UCLA, is helping young players learn the position.

Cole Mazza knew it would be tough to achieve his dream of playing BCS-level college football.

At 6-foot-2 and 240 pounds, Mazza is big and strong, but not BCS big. He'd be the minnow on any line of 300-pound lunkers in the Big Ten or Southeastern Conference.

Yet this fall, Mazza is going to Alabama on a full scholarship to play for coach Nick Saban's national-champion Crimson Tide. And it's all because he can fling a football through his legs better than any teenager from Seattle to Sarasota.

Mazza, in fact, is the first incoming freshman long snapper ever to be offered a scholarship by Saban at Alabama.

Mazza says he owes it all to Chris Rubio, a former long snapper at UCLA in the 1990s who is in his 11th year running specialty camps for long snappers all across the U.S.

While other kids were dreaming of throwing perfect spirals for touchdowns, Mazza was working with Rubio -- attending about 20 of his camps -- to perfect the quickest, most

accurate and reliable two-handed backward spirals for punts and kicks.

"I've always been the center for my teams as a kid, but about the middle of my sophomore year was when I found Rubio, and I just started getting really competitive with it," says Mazza, who snapped and played all along the line at Liberty High in Bakersfield, Calif. "I was just trying to find a way to get to a D-I school, and that was my ticket."

Over and over, Mazza would return to a Rubio's camp to refine his mechanics, get an evaluation of his technique and compete against other snappers. To those watching at home or from the stands, a long snapper's job seems simple: hike the ball.

To Mazza and all the others who attend long-snapping camps with the hope of snagging one of the growing number of scholarships available to snappers, there's so much more: grip, speed, accuracy, consistency, mental toughness, blocking, kick coverage and tackling.

"There's always something to work on," says Mazza, who was ranked by some as the nation's No. 1 long-snapping recruit. "Like if I have a low snap, he'll say I'm not following through all the way. There's always little tweaks that he's given me every camp that have made me completely better every time I go."

The result: With a growing crop of polished long snappers available every year -- trained and ranked through national camp competitions -- more college coaches are deciding to pursue them and offer scholarships to ensure long-term stability on their special teams. Bad snaps can mean a missed kick, a block, a fumble, a lost game.

A Rivals.com report last season estimated there has been a 20 percent increase in scholarships awarded to long snappers in the past five to six years. By getting a long-snapping specialist, a coach has one less worry for the next four years. As former UCLA coach Terry Donahue once told Rubio, "If I never speak to you, you're doing perfect."

"When you get a long snapper, it's one of those things where you want to recruit him and then you want to say, 'Good job, you graduated,'" Rubio says. "You don't want to talk to him any time during that four years."

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There are many long-snapping camps held each year. Some are regional, some are run by current or former NFL long snappers and others by college programs in conjunction with instruction for kickers and punters.

The three largest national camps are Kohl's Snapping, Pro Snapper and Rubio's Long Snapping, which is the oldest.

Zach Hirth, a redshirt freshman at Illinois, estimates he went to about 10 camps during his high school years in Eureka, Mo., including Kohl's, Pro Snapper and Kornblue, picking up tips and getting exposure to college coaches through the camps' rating systems.

Before he decided to attend Illinois as a preferred walk-on, Hirth was rated by some as

the nation's No. 2 snapper.



Chris Rubio, left, is helping players such as Cole Mazza earn scholarships.

“At first I was trying to get instruction on the game, on the snapping, the technique and everything,” says Hirth, who now has a scholarship with the Illini. “And then it got important in trying to get recruited. Get your name out there.”

As one of the top two rated snappers in his senior season (according to Kohl's), he was picked to snap in the Under Armour High School All-America Game in January of 2012. Reid Ferguson of Buford, Ga., the top-ranked snapper, played for the other side. He earned a scholarship to LSU.

Like Mazza, Hirth saw long snapping as his ticket to college.

“I started long snapping in pee wee football,” he recalls. “I was a center, so one of my coaches taught me to long snap. I picked it up, didn't really give it much attention until my freshman or sophomore year when my dad read up on it and said, ‘Hey, you can actually get a scholarship at the position.’ So then I started practicing a lot more.”

Hirth credits Kevin Garvoille of Kohl's, a former long snapper at Wisconsin-Whitewater, for much of his growth.

Garvoille wishes he'd had the chance to go to long snapping camps.

“I was always one of those that was kind of self-taught,” he says.

Once Garvoille got to college, he picked up more techniques and then further refined his knowledge after graduating, citing Rob Davis, who snapped 11 years for the Green Bay Packers, as a mentor. Garvoille began coaching with Kohl's in 2005, when it held five long-snapping camps. Now Garvoille works at 50 to 55 camps a year.

The camps, he says, are necessary for snappers wanting to play in college, both for the instruction and the exposure.

“Your quarterbacks, your running backs, your receivers -- you can make a name for yourself through game highlights and all that. But when it comes to specialties, it almost takes an organization like [us] for kids to come to, do well in the competitive aspect and get their name out there through a high ranking,” he says.

And a good word put in by a coach such as Rubio is like gold. Rubio has sent scores of snappers to college and this year has 66 snappers committed, with 15 to 20 getting scholarships.

“Every coach in the country goes with his word,” Mazza says.

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So what goes on at long-snapping camp?

Each is different. They can be small one-day events geared for instruction, big two-day camps with coaching, film review and competition, and national camps with the best of the best, such as the twice-per-year camps in Las Vegas held by Rubio or the Kohl’s national invitational camp at Wisconsin-Whitewater.

The two biggest elements for instruction and rating at the camps are:

Speed: The faster a snapper can get the ball back to the punter, the less chance there is for a block. The snap should go the 15 yards in .75 to .78 seconds, and anything below .65 is “just oh-my-God fast,” Rubio says. Mazza’s time is a “ridiculous” .55, the second-fastest time Rubio has ever recorded. The fastest was by Tyler Schmitt (.53), formerly of the Seattle Seahawks and San Diego State.



Long-snapping camps offer instruction, as well as player vs. player competition.

Accuracy: Snappers aim for targets and strive for consistency, so snaps become second

nature. "You have to be confident in every single snap or it can ruin a game for you," Mazza says. Adds Hirth: "You've got to have the snap right on the body, not below the waist or above the head. You can't miss like a foot away. It's got to be right there. Precision is the No. 1 thing."

To Rubio, every skill is connected with the next, so he holds competitions that allow him to rank snappers based on speed, accuracy, consistency, size, blocking, mentality, athleticism and spiral.

"I don't do my rankings just off a chart, where you hit this wall 10 times in a row," he says. "It would be like ranking the best player off who's the best free-throw shooter. That would be just ignorant. So I'll have little competitions where I invent a target and ... [they] go against someone else and the first person to essentially miss gets knocked down and goes into the loser's bracket."

These days, even pre-teens are going to long-snapping camps. Rubio has one student from Georgia who'll graduate from high school in 2019 who is "absolutely phenomenal." He has been going to his camps for the past three years.

"Long snapping is very much like a golf swing," Rubio says. "You don't have to be a massive human being to get the technique down. Once you get the form down and let their body grow into it, that's when you get the dominant freaks, almost."

Garvoille says athleticism shines through, even in long snappers.

"If they're going to offer a scholarship to a kid," he says, "when they see him snap they kind of want that wow factor, like, 'Wow, that ball really exploded off his fingertips.' There's a lot of things that go into that: How they move their hips. How they move their feet.

"When we're ranking kids, we're trying to give the coach the best overall evaluation from agility to footwork to snap speed to accuracy."

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Pro Bowler John Denney is among the many showing how important long snapping can be.
Chris Trotman/Getty Images

Years ago, college long snappers often were walk-ons or players with other primary positions, such as center, tight end or fullback.

“God forbid you wasted a scholarship on it,” Rubio says.

Those days are over, as kids focus on snapping as a path to college football. The change has been remarkable.

When Rubio held his first camp in Las Vegas in 2002, he had six or seven snappers attend. At this year’s camp, there were 185.

Those outside football haven’t even recognized the evolution.

As Rubio travels to camps across the country and meets people along the way, they’re shocked to learn there are such things as long snapping camps, let alone college scholarships for snappers.

“I usually just say I’m a private football coach because it’s so tricky for them to understand,” he says. “And then they’ll say, ‘What do you mean?’ And I’ll explain what I do. ‘You make a living doing that?’ I’ll say, ‘Yeah, I can make a living doing this. I pay the bills.’”

“They’ll say it’s amazing it’s become that specialized. And it is a remarkable thing.”

He never thought he'd be a long-snapping coach, and he can't believe he has 2,500 Twitter followers and a YouTube channel that has gotten close to 400,000 views.

"It's shocking," he says, laughing. "It's mind-boggling."

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