

SARALAND SPARTANS

Football's a kick

Senior kicker Justin Harper



Soccer player Justin Harper became Spartans' FG kicker, and now he's vying to be punter, too

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To be honest, Justin Harper is a member of the Saraland football team based on friendship. He was just tagging along, at least at first. But it stuck.

Let Harper explain.

"I was playing soccer and I came up to football tryouts one day," he said. "Coach (Jeff) Kelly (Saraland's head coach) was like, 'Are you going to be my new kicker?' I said, 'Yes sir, I guess so.' ... I had friends who were wanting to play (football), so I wanted to play as well."

That's how the 5-foot-6, 145-pounder, now in his senior season, became the place kicker for the Spartans. And this season he likely will add another chore to his duties as the team's punter. There remains a battle for the position heading into the start of the season, but he holds the edge at the moment.

"He's never punted in a game and if we played tonight he's going to run out there and do our punting, so we'll all find out together (how well he'll do)," Kelly said.

For someone who had concentrated on playing soccer instead of football growing up, Harper has gained confidence in the game and in his abilities. Even though he hasn't punted in an actual game yet, he said he is looking forward to the challenge.

"I'm just ready to see what it feels like whenever I have to punt the ball and I have to follow the ball and wonder what will happen next if I have to stop (the punt returner)," he said. "I'll be prepared for it."

He has already had at least one instance in which he had to

make the tackle as the last resort for the kicking team on a kickoff and he made the play. Learning on the go has been the best experience for Harper.

"His first kick for us was in the state championship game in 2014," Kelly said. "Our starting kicker had torn his hip flexor on one of the kickoffs, so (Harper) had to come in and make a big kick late in the third quarter to put us up by one. And he had never kicked in a varsity game before; heck, he had never kicked in a JV game. He just played freshman ball."

"But he was the only kicker we had and he went in there and nailed it. So from that point I knew he had the nerve to be that guy. He's been a good player and he's worked so hard and gotten so much better and he's worked so hard in the weight room. I'm really proud of the work and strength that he's gained in the weight room. Justin is very consistent and his kickoffs are getting better."

Kicking a soccer ball and kicking a football require different approaches, and that was the first difference Harper had to deal with when joining the Spartans' team.

"It's completely different," he explained. "In soccer, you're not trying to kick it over the crossbar, you're trying to kick it under the crossbar. For football you're leg has to be higher and for soccer you have to lean over the ball. It took from freshman year, when I first started kicking (in football), it took about two weeks to learn how to kick a football. I kept leaning over the ball and kicking line drives."

"I feel comfortable with it now. I'm able to kick a soccer ball or a football, whenever it's time for me to do it."

For the armchair quarterbacks who don't respect kickers and their role in the game, Harper has a message to offer.

"Most people say, 'You're just a kicker, no big deal, anybody could do it.' But in reality, not a lot of people can do it," he said. "A lot of people have tried. The kicker, I would say, is the backbone (of a team) because when you need three points and you're able to provide those three points, you're the savior."

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