

## FOOTBALL

# Late pressure just part of job for place-kickers

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On Aug. 31, Jared Sylvester was living what he called "every kicker's dream."

The place-kicker on the Upper Arlington High School football team had just drilled a 28-yard field goal in overtime to give the Golden Bears a 24-21 win over Gahanna, and he was flying around the field taking it in.

"I could tell it was going in, and I just started running," Sylvester said moments later.

In the minutes leading up to the kick, Sylvester had to walk the fine line in his mind between dream and nightmare. The joy of the winning kicker is unmatched in almost all of sports, but the pressure of the preceding moments is something few would envy.

"First of all, I probably wouldn't want to do it," Dublin Coffman coach Mark Crabtree said. "That's the first thing that comes to my mind."

The pressure doesn't get any easier as players advance to college and professional levels, but Crabtree said when it's a high school kicker out there, you never know exactly what that pressure will do.

"It's a very, very tough scenario to put a high school kid in," Crabtree said. "College guys, pro guys, that's why they do what they do. In a high school scenario, that's very tough because not many high school guys have ever experienced that situation."

### Plenty of company

Sylvester was one of a group of kickers in the area to have a kick with the game on the line this fall. According to games reported each week, there were roughly 30 field-goal or extra-point situations late in a regulation or in overtime in which the kick was to tie the game or go ahead.



BY LORRIE CECIL/THISWEEK

**Canal Winchester place-kicker Tyler Shryock (6) and holder Tyler Thompson begin celebrating as Sean Figley of Germantown Valley View looks on after Shryock made a 22-yard field goal with 6.6 seconds remaining to lift the host Indians to a 17-16 victory in a first-round Division III playoff game last Friday.**

Sylvester and Columbus Academy's Anthony Ciminello, who made a 32-yard field goal as time expired to lift the Vikings to a 31-29 win over Centerburg on Sept. 7, were the only two made kicks on the last play of a game. Four other kicks virtually clinched a game by putting a team in front with less than a minute to play.

Pickerington Central's Adam Castin hit the most late-game field goals of any kicker in the area -- from 23 yards to tie Groveport with 15 seconds left on Sept. 7, from 22 in the first overtime against Groveport (Central eventually won 15-9) and from 28 in an overtime in a 10-7 win over Olentangy on Oct. 12.

The longest pressure kick converted belonged to Gahanna's Trevor Stewart, who made one from 40 yards to tie the game in the second overtime against Dublin Jerome on Sept. 21 (Gahanna eventually won 20-17 in triple-overtime).

Last Friday, Canal Winchester's Tyler Shryock made the first winning kick of the postseason. With 6.6 seconds remaining and second-seeded Canal Winchester trailing Germantown Valley View 16-14 in the first round of the Division III playoffs, the sophomore connected on a 22-yard attempt to lift his team to a 17-16 win.

Most kickers say they just keep kicking on the sideline in the moments before the kick to try to maintain their confidence, but Shryock didn't even have that luxury. Shryock could do nothing but wait patiently because he had no net to use for practice kicks, and he couldn't deny that nerves were a factor.

"I was really nervous," Shryock said. "I was just thinking, I've got to make it for the seniors. They've been through everything and all the losing. It just feels good."

Coffman's Mitch Haines hit one of the most notable and dramatic kicks, from 20 yards with 34 seconds left that gave Coffman a 9-7 win over Scioto on Sept. 21. For Haines, who had missed or had blocked four field goals and an extra point earlier in the game, the stress might have been greater than for any other kicker this season.

"Definitely the biggest emotion was just relief (when I made it)," Haines said. "I finally made one, because so many of them before were bad kicks or they got blocked. That was just a feeling of relief, because those missed kicks weren't going to cost us a game that we were dominating."

Fortunately for Haines, he wasn't one of a handful of kickers who missed critical field goals or extra points late in a game. Seven times this season, games in the area were decided by a missed or blocked kick in the final minutes, and two other games were lost because of a missed extra point that could have tied the game late.

Westerville Central's Ben Buchanan, an Ohio State recruit, said he believes elite kickers have to crave the moment when the game is on the line, regardless of the consequences of a miss.

"As a kicker, you have to want that situation," he said. "The running back has a job, the quarterback has a job and the kicker has a job, kickers, punters and specialists. And sometimes they're called on in those late-game situations, and that's part of your job."

### **Others play key roles**

Coaches and kickers will attest that much more goes into a pressure kick than just the contact of ball and foot.

In order for the kicker to live his dream, two other key players have to do their job. Every winning kick is the product of a long-snapper, a holder and a kicker working in harmony.

"Obviously, they are crucial," Gahanna coach Mike Lanza said. "The snap and the hold have to occur simultaneously in order for a kicker to get into a routine, and we've been fortunate that we've been able to keep both of our guys healthy."

Although holders and long-snappers rarely get much of the glory publicly for a winning kick, they are sure to make headlines if their jobs aren't executed. New York Giants long-snapper Trey Junkin was widely criticized after a botched snap in a playoff loss to the San Francisco 49ers in 2003, and Tony Romo of the Dallas Cowboys had to answer as many questions this past offseason about his failed hold on an extra-point attempt as he did about his play at quarterback.

Coffman holder Brook Minda said Romo's blunder wasn't far from his mind before Haines' winning kick.

"When I ran out from the sideline, I don't know who it was, but somebody actually said that. They said, 'Don't be Tony Romo,'" Minda said. "I just kind of laughed, looked at him and said, 'I'm not going to be.' I just ran out there and did it."

Typically, holders and long-snappers are also position players, and being involved in the game can help ease the mental angst in the moments before a big kick. Still, some relish the idea of having a critical, though underappreciated, role in the game's biggest play.

"I kind of like having pressure," said Gahanna long-snapper Ryan Larimer, who has been involved in three overtime field goal situations this year. "It makes me do better. If I mess up, it's all on me. So I have to do my job to get everything started for Trevor to do his job and for (holder Elliott Williams) to do his job."

### **Distractions aplenty**

Of course, in every late-game kicking situation, there are an equal number of players, coaches and fans hoping something goes wrong on the attempt.

The fans do their part by creating as hostile of an environment as they can, although the numbers don't reflect much of a home-field advantage. Visiting kickers were 8-for-10 on late-game field goals, compared to 9-for-12 for home kickers.

Obviously, opposing players can have an impact on the kick as well. Coffman preserved its unbeaten regular season by blocking a 30-yard attempt by Upper Arlington in a tie game with a minute to play. Coffman went on to win 31-24 in overtime.

Though coaches have no way of physically affecting a late-game kick, they have long tried to play psychological games with opposing kickers. The benefit of icing the kicker -- calling a timeout as the opposing team lines up for the kick -- has been debated for years.

The consensus among kickers was that icing either had no effect or could be helpful to the kicker, but a recent study showed that the move does appear to have some merit for the defense, at least at the professional level.

Scott Berry and Craig Wood, in a 2004 article in *Chance* magazine, examined kicks from the 2002 and 2003 NFL seasons and concluded that the percentage of successful kicks dropped from 76 to 66 when a timeout was called.

On Oct. 19, Hartley coach Dick Geyer iced Spencerville kicker Matt Wirth before a 20-yard attempt that would have won the game in regulation. Wirth missed, and although he made a field goal in the second overtime, Hartley eventually won 27-24.

"If we've got one (timeout) left, we sure would use it," Geyer said.

What fans don't often realize is that the timeout is often called for reasons other than just to give the kicker more time to think.

"I think you do it sometimes to maybe set up your own thing," Lanza said. "(You see) how they line up and maybe how you're going to block it. I think there are a lot of reasons you might do it other than to ice the kicker."

### **Stay focused**

As Haines stood on the sideline moments before his decisive kick against Scioto, there was plenty for him to think about: the misses earlier in the game, the possibility of Scioto coach Karl Johnson calling a timeout, how easy the kick seemed in practice, what would happen if he missed again, how he could redeem himself with one kick.

But as he strolled out onto the field, his mind was blank.

And then long-snapper Kyle Lucas reminded him of the situation.

"I just told him, you can't miss this," Lucas said. "A lot is riding on this game. We can't miss this right here."

He didn't.