

TIGERS' MYSTROM IS ON THE BALL FORMER WEST PLAYER THREATENS TO SHATTER SCORING RECORD

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Nick Mystrom is that rarest of college football players in this age of specialization: The guy who does everything. He punts, he kicks, he catches, he takes out the garbage. Well, maybe not everything. But close. He punts, kicks extra points and field goals and is a full-time position player at wide receiver for Colorado College. You might think Mystrom was still in high school at West High in Anchorage, because only high school players get to stay on the field that long. Not college players and especially not pro players, some of whom play only a couple downs in a game.

Given that the multipurpose player hasn't been in vogue since the hula-hoop, Mystrom is one of the playingest gridsters in the nation.

And since he always has a hand or foot on the ball, that means Mystrom has accumulated some major numbers for Colorado College. With two regular-season games remaining, plus a likely playoff game for the 7-0 NCAA Division III Tigers, Mystrom is on the verge of becoming the school's all-time leading scorer.

A senior who will graduate in December with an economics degree, Mystrom has scored 240 points and needs 10 more to break the record of Ted Swan, a 1970s era kicker for CC.

This has not been a bad deal for CC, which doesn't give athletic scholarships, especially since Mystrom found the school by accident. He was in Colorado Springs for a recruiting visit at Air Force and stumbled upon 1,900-student CC across town.

At the time, the Tigers, who went 1-8 in 1988, Mystrom's freshman year, were pretty casual about football. Mystrom said that when he telephoned long-time CC coach Jerry Carle about sending film, he was told, "Nah, just show up."

Which he did. And ended up kicking and punting right away.

"I thought I'd have to wait until my junior year to get to play," said Mystrom, who cares a lot more about the opportunity to actually play all four years than threatening a scoring record he didn't even know about.

"You have to take records for what they're worth, but it's definitely nice to leave your mark," he said.

Mystrom did plenty of playing at West. He punted, kicked, played quarterback and defense for the Eagles in just two years of football. He switched to the game late after devoting much of his energy to soccer.

Former West coach Gary Beller knew Mystrom had a strong leg and he hustled him in P.E. class until Mystrom finally turned out to kick a different shaped ball.

"He's a tremendous athlete," Beller said. "He learned a real lot. It staggers the imagination to think what he would do if he started playing football in junior high."

Mystrom was hardly a giant in high school, and size is certainly a trait big-time colleges admire. He now stands 6-foot-3 and weighs 190 pounds, but he's gained 30 pounds since leaving West.

"I was a late bloomer," Mystrom said.

Mystrom, 22, sat talking on the \$4 garage-sale fake leather couch in his off-campus apartment beneath a 50-cent framed crushed velvet Elvis Presley painting. Clearly, he is a smart shopper when it comes to furnishings, as well as colleges.

Lanky, with dark brown hair, Mystrom's girth still does not strike fear into the hearts of opponents. His leg does, though.

Just a few weeks ago in a victory over Austin College in Texas, Mystrom attempted a 60-yard field goal. The boot had the distance, but was wide by a yard. He routinely nails kicks in the 40-49-yard range and in past years has hit some from beyond 50. He hit a 56-yarder in a pre-season exhibition this fall.

"I think he can make them," said Craig Rundle, who became CC's coach four seasons ago. "We wouldn't try it if we didn't think he had a shot at it."

The Tigers aren't the only ones who think Mystrom has howitzer firepower in his leg. The Cleveland Browns have flirted with him and guys from the National Football League scouting combines pay him compliments.

As Mystrom says, it may be difficult for the pros to determine if a running back can cut it at a higher level of play, but a 50-yard field goal is a 50-yard field goal.

Not that Mystrom expects to be drafted. Now that the NFL has gone to a 7-round draft, the pros aren't going to be taking flyers on Division III kickers. But Mystrom could be invited to a pro camp as a free agent.

Only three Alaskans Rocky Klever and Mark Schlereth of Anchorage and Tom Neville of Fairbanks have played in the NFL, and Mystrom isn't fooling himself about his chances.

"For most guys, for me, it's just a huge dream," he said. "And it'll probably stay a dream. You figure the Browns send a letter to anyone who has the tiniest shred of ability. I wasn't really counting on being a first-rounder. But it's just ridiculous to pass it up. You've got to try."

Beller thinks Mystrom is a legitimate pro candidate.

"I bet he could do that," Beller said. "He used to kick 50-yarders in practice here in high school. Now he's got his technique down."

Although Mystrom's early success came in soccer, he did play some football growing up. He and his dad, Rick, the mayoral candidate, invented a game that they played on the street in front of their house.

They called the game "kick back" and punted the ball back and forth.

"That's what I think back to," said Rick. "I could beat him till he was about 15 years old."

Rick is trying to see every game his son plays this fall in his final intercollegiate year.

"There's no place I'd rather be than seeing him," said the senior Mystrom.

Family members were among the 500 fans in the stands at CC's Washburn Field last Saturday on a sunny afternoon when the Tigers won 31-29 over Hardin-Simmons of Texas.

Mystrom, having one of his do-everything days, scored a touchdown on a six-yard pass, and kicked a 31-yard field goal, plus four extra points on a partially snow-covered field. That helped his team build a 31-9 lead. He also had a spectacular leaping catch at midfield called back because of a penalty and was ruled out of the end zone on what would have been a second touchdown catch.

Most kickers' toughest second duty is kicking off. But Mystrom's versatility isn't contrived.

"He's been able to do all things pretty well," said Rundle. "I think he's done a good job of excelling at all of them."

Field-goal kickers usually hang around the sidelines waiting to be called. Mystrom's situation is different. He is focusing on running routes and hauling in passes right up till the moment he kicks. His adjustment to the combined tasks most resemble biathletes'. They ski hard with pounding hearts, then must steady their breathing and nerves to shoot straight.

"I have to go from a mental state of receiver-ready to the relaxed state of a kicker," Mystrom said. "I'll be thinking, 'Just relax and kick.' "

Mystrom seemed perfectly relaxed for every boot against Hardin-Simmons and every boot was needed since the Cowboys missed a two-point conversion to tie with a minute left.

Wearing the black and gold uniform of the Tigers, Mystrom looked like a Pittsburgh Steeler kicker when he took his two steps and boomed the field goal without difficulty on his only try. Most of his punts traveled about 40 yards, but in the closing seconds he blasted one 55 yards, pinning Hardin-Simmons inside the five-yard-line.

He punted. He kicked. He caught. Just like back in high school. Mystrom does it all and there aren't too many places that would let him. But there's still room for a triple threat in Division III.

"You always picture yourself running out of the tunnel at Michigan before 105,000 people," Mystrom said. "But you've got to be realistic. I'm having fun. I made a great choice."

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