

Dogs' kicker was always a man of the road

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Nick Mystrom, kicker for the CFL Memphis Mad Dogs, has this affinity for Volkswagen vans. Call it family tradition.

He took his first van ride in 1972. His father, Rick, and mother, Mary, packed then-8-month-old "Nicky," the family dog and all their possessions, into the van and bolted Garden Grove, Calif., for Anchorage, Alaska. Rick bought an advertising company that he turned into the state's largest, and last year became the mayor of Anchorage.

Nick Mystrom earned an economics degree in 1993 from Colorado College - where he starred in football at quarterback, wide receiver, punter, kicker and kick returner - and set out to succeed without his father's influence.

Except when it came to vehicles.

"I got this Volkswagen van and drove to NFL camps, trying to get somebody to work me out - I went to all the ones east of Denver," said Mystrom, who has made 18-of-24 field goals and will kick for the Mad Dogs against the Birmingham Barracudas at Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium Sunday at 2:30 p.m.

"I got four workouts," Mystrom said. "I didn't catch on, but I knew I wanted to play pro football.

"I'm proud of my dad and I'm proud of the fact that he's the mayor of Anchorage. But the bottom line is anytime you experience success, you always have to wonder to what degree his influence helped you. It feels good to come down here to Memphis, where nobody knows who I am and nobody knows I'm the mayor's son."

Political influence didn't help when Nick pulled a leg muscle in training camp and had to start the season on the practice squad, nor could it erase two misses and a block in his first appearance. Mystrom finished that game watching Donald Igwebuike kick a field goal for a 23-20 victory over Ottawa, and didn't kick in the next three games.

A different political office, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, unintentionally gave Mystrom his next chance when it determined that Igwebuike, a native of Nigeria, did not have a valid work visa. Mystrom made three field goals in a 25-15 victory at Baltimore Aug. 12, and has been consistent since.

But at the high point, the game-winning 37-yarder with 48 seconds left in a 22-21 victory over Shreveport Sept. 10, and the low point, an inexplicable hook that caused the Mad Dogs to fall 34-32 at Saskatchewan Sunday, Rick Mystrom did have some influence - parental influence, that is.

"He called us right after the Ottawa game and was really, really down," the mayor said in a telephone interview. "Mary and I talked to Nick almost every day for two or three weeks. I'm proud that he stuck it out and decided to stay on the team, even if he was on the practice squad all year.

"This last game, he was real disappointed. But I knew it was different than the Ottawa game. He's doing fine."

Mystrom is - even though he's sold his van.

