




Ravens' Katula explains the mystery of long snapping

Nobody notices except when things go wrong

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When I introduce myself to Matt Katula and shake his hand inside the Ravens' locker room, he seems surprised that someone wants to talk to him. No one ever interviews the long snapper - and that's what Katula does for the Ravens.

On some level, this is understandable. Katula, who towers over me at 6 feet 6, performs the biggest niche job in sports. He launches a ball between his legs, toward the kicker, on field goals and punts. That's it. There is really no equivalent of the long snapper in any other sport. It would be like an **NBA** team having someone on its bench whose only job were inboundng the ball. And depending on how you look at it, it's either the best job in football or the worst.

No one wants to talk to the long snapper as long as he does his job correctly. No one even thinks about him, for the most part. The only time you'll hear the announcers say his name is if he fails on a grand stage.

Katula, however, has not failed. But this only intensifies the Catch-22 that is his existence. The better he is at his job, the easier it looks. I want to experience what it's like to be Matt Katula. I want him to teach me the ancient art of long-snapping.

When I pitch the story to Katula roughly on these terms, he rolls his eyes and laughs.

"Can you throw a football overhand?" he asks.

"For the most part," I answer.

"Then you can learn how to long snap," Katula says. "It's pretty easy."

To an extent, he's right. Snapping can be easy enough to learn. Growing up in Waukesha, Wis., Katula learned the "art of snapping" - again, insert eye roll here - in his backyard as an eighth-grader, under the watchful eye of his father, a former punter. He just didn't see a future in it. By the time he got to high school, he was 6-6, and had a 34-inch vertical leap. He was, basically, everything I am not: athletic, tall, relatively fast and strong enough as a high school defensive end to earn a scholarship to the **University of Wisconsin**.

"I snapped for one year in high school, my junior year," Katula said. "I didn't do it my senior year because I didn't like it. My mom wanted to put it on my highlight film, but I didn't really see the value in it."

The **Wisconsin Badgers'** coaching staff did see the value in it, though. He played defensive end and snapped for two years, but when he broke his arm and had to miss time, two punts were blocked in his absence. The day Katula was healthy, his college coaches forced him to choose between playing defense and snapping. He chose snapping. By the time he graduated, he was considered the best long snapper in college football. The Ravens were impressed enough that they decided to keep him instead of veteran **Joe Maese** in 2005. The team signed him to a five-year contract extension last year.

I want Katula to know I'm taking this seriously when I arrive for our session at the Ravens indoor practice facility. I wanted him to know I was a professional, that I was going to treat his job and his profession with a modicum of respect. And I wanted to look the part. So moments before leaving my house, I grabbed a pair of football cleats from my basement and tucked them under my arm.

"So you busted out the cleats, huh?" Katula said, raising a skeptical eyebrow. "All right then."

The first thing you should know about Katula is that he's universally regarded as one of the nicest guys in the Ravens' locker room. He was patient and funny and helpful, even when I was foolishly inept. He taught me how to grip the football and how to block out the idea of getting punched in the back of the head the minute I let it fly.

So what makes Katula better than, say, a goofball like me?

"Consistency," says Ravens special teams coach Jerry Rosburg. "As we all know, it's a lot like what they say about umpires: The good ones you never notice in baseball, because the game just flows. And that's the way it is with long snappers. You really don't notice them unless something goes wrong. And the key for Matt is he throws a real good ball, and he's consistent."

I am not consistent. After Katula shows me the proper way to grip the ball and reminds me to take a wide stance, I fire a few snaps at Ravens punter Sam Koch, who is down on his knee simulating a field goal. And for the most part, I don't embarrass myself. The best tip Katula gives me is, "Don't try to spin the ball." The spin is natural the way it comes out of the snapper's hand.

A few of my snaps actually get a nod of approval from Koch.

"I think it's all in the teaching," Katula says.

It should be pointed out that I have a considerable advantage. At no point is someone going to "accidentally" punch me in the face seconds after I send a wobbling ball back toward Koch. Although it's technically against the rules to hit the center, you're more likely to get flagged for making eyes at **Tom Brady's** wife than you are for hitting the long snapper.

"It's inevitable," Katula says of getting hit in the head. "You have a mass of humanity on the other side of the line, the biggest guys on the team coming at you, so you just try to hold your ground and trust the guys next to you."

So what does it feel like when you have to snap for a game-winning field goal? What do you hear out there?

"It's mostly just white noise," Katula says. "You just try to focus on making it seem like any other snap. As an athlete, you don't really think about it like, 'OK, this one is for the game.' You can't approach it that way."

Whatever pride I had managed to retain with a decent showing on field goal snaps is erased when we switch to punt snaps. My first attempt looks like I'm duckpin bowling with a recently thawed Thanksgiving turkey. I'm not sure it ever got more than two inches off the ground. It's so bad, Katula doesn't even bother to hide his laughter.

My second snap flutters like a wounded owl. The rest of my attempts are only marginally better. "I never want to make Sam move an inch," Katula says when I ask him what he thinks about, pre-snap. "I want to put him in the best position possible to succeed."

Katula can snap a punt through the window of a moving car, and he can do a pretty good impression of William Tell with a football, breaking fruit in half if he really puts some torque into it.

Near the end of our interview, I feel compelled to ask the goofiest question I can think of: Is there such a thing as long-snapping groupies?

"I have a wife," Katula says, laughing. "She's my only groupie."

A few days later, the Ravens are playing the Vikings, and the game comes down to a 44-yard field goal by Steve Hauschka. The Metrodome is so loud, it feels like my brain is getting shaken up in a paint mixer. I'm not nervous for Hauschka, I'm nervous for Katula and Koch.

Katula's snap isn't perfect - probably six inches to the right of where he wants it - but Koch still catches it easily and gets it down quickly. Every pair of eyes follows the ball as it drifts left of the uprights. As the Vikings crowd erupts with glee, I look back at the mass of humanity, the bodies entangled like a 12-car

pileup at the line of scrimmage.

Somewhere at the bottom of all that is Katula. I think I'm the only person in the stadium wondering what he's thinking.

What will Kevin try next?

Staff reporter Kevin Van Valkenburg learned how to swim the butterfly in a Speedo, caddied for LPGA golfer **Leta Lindley** and long-snapped with the Ravens. What should he try next? Send an e-mail to sports@baltsun.com with your suggestions.

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