

Veteran Special Teams Unit Key to Success

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Growing up in Walnut Creek, Calif., Tom Schneider may never have wanted to think of himself as a special teams expert.

Often associated with the most fragile members of pop-warner squads, special teams used to be where coaches sent kids to get their minimum four plays a game.

But Schneider hasn't played pee-wee football in a long time.

Now recognized as one of the top place-kickers in the Pac-10, the senior will play an integral role in what looks to be one of the Cal football team's most veteran and most impressive special teams units in recent memory.

"I feel like we have really good continuity. We've got a lot of the same guys, some really talented guys, coming back this year," Schneider said. "We've got the potential to do a lot of good things special team wise this year."

Schneider, who was third in the conference in scoring (7.5 points per game) last year, is just a taste of the experience the Bears will bring back in the fall.

Punter Andrew Larson will come back for his senior campaign as the most critical component of a Cal punt team that ranked No. 1 in the Pac-10 a year ago.

The Bears held opponents to just 2.7 yards per punt return, tops in the conference, while netting a league-best 38.3 yards per punt.

"Going into it last year, we didn't really know what our punting situation was going to be," Cal coach Jeff Tedford said. "So we feel pretty solid right now that we've got that type of experience."

An often overlooked aspect to the success of the special teams unit is the long-snapper, but the Bears' Nick Sundberg has made a name for himself.

The junior out of Phoenix was a starter as a true freshman two years ago, while developing into what Schneider thinks is one of the best long-snapping talents in the country.

"I've seen a lot of film on other guys in the Pac-10 and the SEC, and I'd be surprised if you could find a better snapper out there than (Sundberg)." Schneider said. "He's so vital—he's the heartbeat of this unit. He may be one of the most overlooked players in the country."

If Sundberg is the heartbeat of Cal's kicking game, then likewise, DeSean Jackson is the soul of the Bears' return game.

Jackson, an All-American, led the Pac-10 in average yards per punt return (17.5) and punt returns for touchdowns (4) last season, and will be arguably the country's top return man this season.

But while Jackson's highlight reel game-breakers garner him the national hype, it's the field position that he and the rest of the return unit give Cal's offense that may be most important attributing to the Bears' conference-leading 32.8 ppg.

"The return team as a whole has a great scheme and they really get the job done," junior quarterback Nate Longshore said. "They start us with great field position, and anytime you can work with a short field, it's an advantage. It's an added bit of confidence knowing they can get us that much closer."

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