

Ficken lookin' good: Kicker enjoys resurgence after rotten start

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By Timothy Schoen

UNIVERSITY PARK -- Sam Ficken hung a game day magazine from the Penn State-Virginia game in his room following the team's devastating loss to the Cavaliers earlier this season.

The sophomore kicker used it as a reminder that things could get better in the young season if he continued to work hard.

They have gotten better, too, and Ficken removed the magazine from his wall last week. He said he has moved on from the Virginia game, in which he missed four field goals -- one on the final play -- and an extra point in the Nittany Lions' 17-16 loss.

"As a kicker, you try and forget missed kicks," Ficken said. "It is going to be in the back of your head sometimes because that's just how kicking goes."

Ficken said the positive support he received following that game outweighed the negative comments that came his way through Twitter and Facebook. His support system of family, friends, teammates and coaches all rallied around him during that time.

"I think the biggest thing was keeping the mindset that I have to work hard to correct what I am doing wrong," he said. "I think I have done that, and it is starting to pay off."

Ficken has improved as the season has gone on, and the young kicker has gotten his confidence back following the early troubles.

Since the Virginia game, he has connected on 9-of-12 field goals. And in Saturday's loss at Nebraska, he hit on all three of his kicks, including a season-long 38-yarder.

"Making these past few kicks, my confidence is definitely increasing," said Ficken, who has made six in a row and has a goal of not missing the rest of the season.

Ficken said former Penn State kickers Massimo Manca, Kevin Kelly and Robbie Gould all reached out to him to provide some words of encouragement and advice this season.

"Being a kicker is kind of like a club, I guess," Ficken said. "You try and stick together when things don't go well, because when things don't go well, people don't really know what you're going through exactly. It is a special position, and you're kind of on your own on that one."

Gould, who is in his eighth NFL season, and Ficken speak on a regular basis. He said initially Gould would break down video from Penn State practice to see where Ficken can improve. As the season has progressed, Gould is now just watching Ficken kick in games on television.

The most important piece of advice Gould gave to Ficken earlier this season was short and sounds quite simple -- "Slow down and don't think too much."

Ficken said that advice applies both mentally and technically. He said he has slowed the game down in his head. But he also has slowed down on his approach to the ball, even if it is only a matter of a tenth of a second.

Earlier in the season, Ficken said he was making contact with the ball 1.2 seconds after it was snapped. Now, with the help of special teams coach John Butler and the advice of Gould, Ficken said he's hitting the ball at 1.3 seconds, and that's causing his kicks to be straighter.

"My ball tended to fade a little bit more than I would have liked in the start of the season," he said. "Now it is a little more straight lined and actually a bit of a draw. I can place it more, so that seems to be helping out."

Another minor tweak to his kicking motion that Ficken has been working on the past few weeks is working on the placement of his plant foot, as well as making better contact with the ball. Ficken said the plant foot helps direct what direction the ball will travel.

Penn State coach Bill O'Brien has said on several occasions in the past few weeks that he is seeing the confidence level in his kicker continue to rise.

"He's much more consistent with where his plant foot is on each kick, and there is a lot of credit that you have to give to him because he's really worked at it," O'Brien said.

Ficken said O'Brien did not make a big deal of his early season struggles. The coach just told him to keep working hard and that good things would come his way.

In addition to the early season struggles, Ficken also has had to fight through two different injuries.

Prior to Saturday's game against Nebraska, some small black rubber pellets that are underneath modern-day field turf got caught in Ficken's eye. He tried to rub his eye to get the rubber out, but Ficken ended up scratching the eye.

"I had to wear sunglasses to keep the wind from drying out my eye throughout the game," he said.

Ficken was forced to wear an eye patch Saturday night when he slept, but he said his eye is fine.

He also has had to recover from a midseason right quad injury that stemmed from "overkicking." His right quad is his kicking leg, but Ficken said the distance of his kickoffs have not seem to change. Last Saturday, he had five touchbacks on six kickoffs.

"I couldn't really kick the week of Ohio State, unfortunately," he said. "After that they kind of limited me. I have been limited in practice a little more than I would like, but I can't really even tell my quad has been bothering me as of now."

It appears Ficken is now healthy and free from any eye or quad ailments. His confidence also seems to be at a season high.

O'Brien said has seen Ficken's confidence grow with every kick he makes. The soft-spoken sophomore is gaining composure and appears to be more and more relaxed every time out.

"When you're kicking better and better, you're gaining more and more confidence," the coach said. "He's a very, very laid back guy that cares about his teammates, and he wants to do well."

