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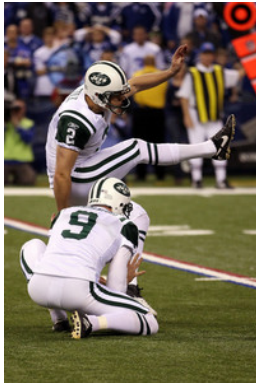
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Newsroom

NFL Playoffs: Burger on Jets Kicker

Professor Michael Burger speaks to Bloomberg News about the kicker who could determine whether the Jets return to the Super Bowl for the first time in 42 years.

From Bloomberg News: "[Inconsistent Jets Kicker May Decide NFL Playoff at Unfriendly Heinz Field](#)" by Erik Matuszewski:



January 21, 2011 -- Nick Folk of the New York Jets botched more field goals this season than any kicker in the National Football League playoffs.

Now he heads to Pittsburgh's Heinz Field -- one of the most difficult NFL stadiums for kickers -- and could determine whether the Jets return to the Super Bowl for the first time in 42 years.

That prospect has some Jets fans concerned heading into the American Football Conference championship game against the Pittsburgh Steelers on Jan. 23. Folk was the Jets' most erratic kicker in more than a decade.

“I’m scared every time he walks onto the field,” said Jets fan

Michael Burger, a New York native who’s now **an associate law professor at Roger Williams University in Bristol, Rhode Island**. “He doesn’t inspire confidence. I don’t know what happened. This year has been a disaster.”

Folk, 26, two weeks ago kicked a field goal that lifted the Jets to a first-round playoff win in Indianapolis. He followed that up by missing his lone attempt in last week’s victory in New England. It’s the extension of an inconsistent season for the former Pro Bowl selection who made 30 of 39 field goals during the regular season -- a 76.9 percentage that was 24th among 30 kickers ranked by the NFL.

A field goal might be the difference between the teams this weekend. Las Vegas oddsmakers list the Jets as 3 1/2-point underdogs and coach Rex Ryan said he expects Folk may be on the field at the end of the game.

“I think that’s what’s going to happen,” Ryan said yesterday during a news conference. “This is going to be hard-fought all the way to the end and probably will be a three-point game. I feel good about Nick.”

Welcome the Opportunity

Folk, who’s in his first season with the Jets after playing for the Dallas Cowboys, said he’d welcome the opportunity to kick with a trip to the Super Bowl hanging in the balance, even at Heinz Field.

“As a kicker that’s the situation you live for,” Folk said in an interview yesterday at the Jets’ training facility in Florham Park, New Jersey. “You feel like you have everyone on your shoulders at that moment.”

While NFL kickers converted 79.7 percent of field-goal tries this season, the percentage for success was 71.8 percent in Pittsburgh. Since Heinz Field opened in 2001, the success rate on postseason field goals is 70.3 percent.

The last time the Jets and Steelers met in the playoffs, after the 2004 season, New York's Doug Brien missed two field goals in the closing minutes at Heinz Field and Pittsburgh won 20-17 in overtime. Brien missed a 47-yard attempt with two minutes left in the fourth quarter and then, following an interception, missed a 43-yard kick as time expired.

Outdoor Stadiums

The most challenging kicking conditions are found at outdoor NFL stadiums built beside a body of water in cold weather cities. The football -- which weighs about one pound (0.45 kilograms) -- can be affected by wind, cold temperatures and moisture in the air, Folk said, with a loss in distance of as much as 10 yards.

The stadiums hosting the conference championship games are prime examples. Heinz Field is located on the Allegheny River and Chicago's Soldier Field is alongside Lake Michigan. The Chicago Bears host the Green Bay Packers in the National Football Conference championship game, also on Jan. 23.

"Everything about kicking at Heinz Field is difficult," said Folk, who will bring four sets of shoes with varying cleat heights for his plant foot, the one he sets in the ground while kicking with his right leg. "It's the weather, the cold, the wind, the field conditions, the footing."

Freezing Weather

Both games this weekend will likely be played in freezing conditions. When the AFC title game kicks off at 6:30 p.m. local time in Pittsburgh, the temperature will be about 15 degrees Fahrenheit (-9.4 Celsius) and falling, AccuWeather Inc. said on its website. At the 3 p.m. kickoff in Chicago, it will be mostly cloudy with a predicted temperature of 19 degrees Fahrenheit and winds of 8-9 miles per hour.

Weather and field conditions at both stadiums may also play a role on kickoffs and punts.

In the Jets' 22-17 win in Pittsburgh last month, Brad Smith returned the opening kickoff 97 yards for a touchdown. Chicago got a 62-yard fourth-quarter punt return for a touchdown from Devin Hester in its 20-17 home win over Green Bay on Sept. 27.

Field Conditions

The sod in Pittsburgh was replaced ahead of last week's playoff win over the Baltimore Ravens after damage from the rink installed for the National Hockey League's Winter Classic on New Year's Day.

While Steelers kicker Shaun Suisham, 29, made a 35-yard field goal against the Ravens, he missed another of 43 yards.

Since Week 1 of the season, the longest field goal made at Heinz Field was Suisham's 42-yarder in the loss to the Jets on Dec. 19, when Folk made kicks of 25 and 34 yards.

Folk's overall field goal percentage during the regular season was the lowest by a Jets kicker since John Hall in 2000.

Even so, if a Super Bowl trip is riding on Folk's right foot in Pittsburgh, Jets punter and holder Steve Weatherford said he has confidence in his kicker.

"He's been here before," Weatherford said after practice this week. "He's missed a kick before. He knows how to bounce back. If this game were to come down to a game-winner, even on that terrible field, I feel confident he would do it."

To read full story, click [here](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-01-21/inconsistent-jets-kicker-may-decide-nfl-playoff-at-unfriendly-heinz-field.html). [http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-01-21/inconsistent-jets-kicker-may-decide-nfl-playoff-at-unfriendly-heinz-field.html]