

Nov. 28 CJ III Football

As a female kicker, Deptula adds extra dimension to Spartans extra points

This story appears in this month's Hamiltonian newspaper, with a few statistical updates.

By Rich Fisher
Sports Writer

Nov. 28: After each Steinert football game this year, the usual ritual of lining up and slapping hands with the other team took place, with each player mumbling “good game” to each other.

And then No. 80 on the Spartans says it in a voice somewhat higher.

“The guys from the other team are really funny,” Barri Deptula says. “You hear them say ‘Is that a girl?’ Some of them even come up and say I did a good job.”

Deptula is indeed a girl and she does indeed do a good job. At a level where PAT kicks often turn into adventures, Deptula has been fairly consistent over the last half of the season as Steinert heads into Saturday’s Central Jersey Group III championship game.

The sophomore place kicker had a few mishaps in the state playoffs but booted her last three attempts successfully against Hamilton to become the first female to score a point in the 53-year history of the series.

At one point during the season, she successfully converted 18 consecutive extra points, and was perfect against Trenton (5-for-5), West Windsor-Plainsboro North (7-for-7), Notre Dame (3-for-3) and West Windsor-Plainsboro South (3-for-3). The string was snapped when her first kick against Wall in the state playoff opener was blocked.

“She’s done very good, and she’s going to do very good in the future,” said linebacker Ryan Malagrino. “She has a lot of potential.”

For the season, Deptula is 34-for-46, with five of those misses being blocks. Deptula’s percentage of successful conversions without the blocks is 83 percent, which isn’t bad by high school standards.

“She’s done a great job,” running back Jeff Mattonelli said. “She struggled early in the year, someone worked with her and since then she’s been flawless. We have a lot of confidence in her now. It’s great to have her. She’s one of us.”

That last comment speaks as loudly as anything to do with Deptula’s performance.

While female football players are not new or earth-shattering anymore, they are still unique. Football is, after all, the ultimate macho male world.

But, as coach Dan Caruso pointed out, the Spartans had two other girls on their team in the past five years, so this isn’t some kind of reality check for the Spartans.

“The guys have learned how to accept her,” Caruso said. “It’s not rocky, but as a kicker you’re isolated a lot of times anyway. And a girl kicker you worry about them being isolated even more, but the kids have really welcomed her and opened up to her and they have a very good relationship.”

At the very worst, Deptula just had to overcome a few surprised looks.

“When I arrived, I think some guys were shocked because most of the people wouldn’t believe I would play football,” she said. “No one has given me a hard time, the coaches are great and the guys have always made me feel that I fit in. I think having girls in the past has helped, because I don’t know that all teams would be as accepting of a girl.”

When females first started playing football, it sent concerned psychiatrists looking for reasons for this disturbing occurrence. Was it a cry for help? Did daddy not pay them enough attention?

But then, the esteemed Dr. Cyndi Lauper came along with a musical version alluding to the

true reason – Girls just want to have fun.

Deptula started playing soccer at age 10. She had a pretty good leg, and when she reached seventh grade a coach told her to consider kicking a football and she decided he was right.

“I never really watched football on TV, so I started watching the kickers when they came out to do PATs or kick-offs,” Deptula said. “I really wanted to try it. The summer before ninth grade, my dad and I watched YouTube videos of kickers and started practicing.”

She showed up for practice as a freshman, undaunted at entering a male world, and was placed on the freshman team where Caruso said “She did OK” kicking PATs.

This year she won the place kicking job, and things couldn’t have started on a more messy note.

After converting her first two PAT attempts, Deptula missed the third, which proved costly in a 21-20 loss to Steinert (it’s lone setback in the first seven games).

Caruso sprung to her defense immediately afterward, noting that it was hardly a clean snap and that the ball was not even on the ground when her foot made contact.

“I was upset for my team, but I thought about it that night and realized sometimes it’s going to happen,” Deptula said. “I knew leaving the field that people were going to blame me. Coach Caruso came out in my defense, which made me feel not as bad about the situation. After that kick, I couldn’t wait until the next game.”

Deptula bounced back, but was still inconsistent the first half of the season. But band parent Carl Romero, a former kicker for Dartmouth University, observed some flaws from the stands and asked Caruso if he could help. The coach jumped at the opportunity and Romero came in once a week.

“I started getting into bad kicking habits and he has brought me back to basics,” Deptula said. “He really didn’t change me that much. My steps are more comfortable now and I feel more confident going out on the field.

“We began working on exploding through the ball. I think because of the adjustments we’ve made, my steps feel more natural and I can tell I’m hitting the ball better. I can’t thank him enough.”

Deptula knows she still has a long way to go. Building leg strength while adjusting her mechanics to kicking longer distances is a priority.

“The short stuff she can do, but right now we’re not going to ask her to win a game with a 45-yard field goal,” Caruso said.

Deptula is still pining to try a field goal. She says her range is 30 yards, after that she is erratic.

As for kick-offs, Deptula handled that duty for the freshman team. When asked what would happen if she was the last line of defense on a return, her answer was classic.

“I would be like any other player and hit him,” she said matter-of-factly.

For now, however, her main concern is to kick balls through uprights, which she hopes to do in college.

“I hope if I do reach a college level, they’ll be as accepting of me as my team is now,” she said. “At practice I feel like ‘one of the guys.’ We’re together so much it’s like we are one big family. I’m the only child in my family and since freshman year it feels like I gained like, 40 or so brothers.”

And despite Deptula playing a position that appears to be quite singular in effort, she heaps tons of thanks on snapper Alex Amodie, holder Tyler Zandomenego and the line.

“Without them, I wouldn’t have the points I have,” said Deptula, who also appreciates the opportunity she has been given.

“Coach Caruso took a big chance on me,” she said. “I wouldn’t ever want to let him down.”

Deptula’s loyalty to her teammates is returned in full.

“We look out for her like she’s one of us,” Mattonelli said. “Nobody here gives her a hard time.”

And someone on the other team did such a thing?

“We stick up for her,” Malagrino said. “Nobody messes with her.”