



New relaxed attitude pays off for Packers kicker Crosby

By [Tyler Dunne](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Green Bay - Be forewarned. This new approach doesn't come without risks. Each night, the distinct possibility of getting whacked with a golf club lingers. Mason Crosby knows this.

His 1-year-old son, Nolan, loves his new set of plastic golf clubs.

"I'm scared he's going to hit something, hit one of us in the face or something," the Green Bay Packers kicker said. "But he's actually not bad. He can swing at the ball."

It's all part of Crosby's new attitude this season. He's living stress-free, he's at peace. Married, with a son, Crosby says football no longer consumes him 24/7. Off the field, perspective drives him. And on the field, special teams coach Shawn Slocum has given Crosby the freedom to swing away on kickoffs. The result is a career season. Through seven games, the fifth-year kicker is a perfect 14 for 14. He has nailed kicks from 56 yards (at Atlanta) and 58 yards (at Minnesota).

Nearly every kick has been picturesque - dead center. Crosby's streak of 21 straight field goals is a team record. In terms of preparation and technique, there have been no extreme changes.

The difference? No longer is Crosby the overworked lawyer bringing his work home.

"I've learned how to separate the two," he said. "I go home and I'm with my son, with my wife and I'm really immersed in that. Once I'm here, at work, I'm dialed in and focused. It's really been freeing for me just to have that separation."

That hasn't been the case before. Certainly not when Crosby let the occasional funk drown his consciousness.

Through his first four seasons, Crosby's leg strength has been important in unpredictable conditions at Lambeau Field, but he has ranked near the bottom of the NFL in field goal percentage. In 2007, he was 27th (79.5%). In 2008, he was 30th (79.4%). In 2009, he was 28th (75%). And last year, Crosby was 30th (78.6%).

Still, Crosby was a priority for general manager Ted Thompson in free agency. The kicker signed a five-year, \$14.75 million contract. Since then, he's been perfect.

In the past, Crosby admits he looked too far ahead. An "end result" was in mind.

"Whenever I have a number I want at the end of the year, I feel like I'm limiting myself," Crosby said. "I just kind of take each kick and separate them from one kick to the next. Make, miss, whatever happens, you move onto the next one and take them as they come."

Crosby hasn't splurged on anything yet with that new contract. He already bought a house after his rookie year. The kicker also loves surfing the Web for new cars but hasn't made a purchase. It's merely window shopping. Instead, Crosby has bought dinner for punter/holder Tim Masthay and long-snapper Brett Goode each week he has received the special teams game ball.

Maybe when this season's over, he'll pull out the checkbook on something big. For now, he's balancing fatherhood and football. Crosby's trying not to be the overbearing father. Nolan watches sports on television, chases the family's dogs around the house and, yes, perfects his golf swing.

"Sometimes (football) is all you think about," Crosby said. "You kind of ride the highs and lows a little bit too much. It is

easy for me now to go home and separate the two. I'm here, I'm focused, everything is sharp, everything is focused. I can go home and enjoy my time with my family because I know where each thing is important in my life. I'm trying to enjoy each part of it instead of just, 'football is everything.'"

The liberation has sifted into his game, too. After last season, Slocum and Crosby had a meeting. Rather than have Crosby toy with a variety of kicks on kickoffs - such as directional pop-ups - he's free to use the bazooka. No more games. No use getting cute. Crosby is free to drive the ball.

So far, 52.2% of Crosby's kicks have been touchbacks. As Slocum notes, this decision was made before a new league rule moved kickoffs up 5 yards.

"He just wants to pound the ball," Slocum said. "It's like a golfer just being able to hit the driver all the time. That's the fun part. He's doing that and doing it very well."

Most importantly, this rhythm translates to Crosby's field-goal attempts. His head is cleared. No longer using several different styles of kicks, he's in a zone.

"He doesn't have to worry about hitting four or five different types of kicks," Slocum said. "He lines up and hits the same ball every time. It's repetition."

Both Crosby and Slocum are quick to credit the whole operation. For the second straight season, Crosby has the same holder (Masthay) and long-snapper (Goode). That's "vitally important," Slocum said. Continuity, the ball firing into place at the same rate repeatedly, has further allowed Crosby to swing freely.

He doesn't hesitate or count his steps anymore.

Goode has noticed a more relaxed, more centered Crosby.

"It's just like with any job," Goode said. "You don't necessarily want to take your job home with you every single night. You need to relax. I think that helps him. He can go home and just kind of get away from it and be with his family."

"There's definitely a big mental side to it," Masthay added. "That's true for anybody's position but especially for our position. You have limited plays. You're out there for a very limited amount of time. The play itself is just your foot making contact with the ball. So it's crucial to stay even keel and stay confident."

There has been one thing missing from Crosby's red-hot start, one thing that defines kickers. Green Bay is constantly playing with second-half leads. He hasn't had a chance at a pressure-packed, do-or-die, game-winning kick.

It's bound to come. And then Crosby's refreshed mentality truly will be put to the test.

Bring it on, says Slocum.

"When he has that opportunity," he said, "he'll nail it."

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BayHawks select Higgins, Daniels in draft's first round

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The Erie BayHawks filled two priorities -- combo guard and center -- in the first round of the 2011 D-League Draft on Thursday night.

The BayHawks used the seventh overall pick to take Cory Higgins out of Colorado, then took 7-footer Chris Daniels with the ninth overall pick.

"They're two guys that we identified as really fitting into our system and the Knicks' philosophy of skilled players that can play multiple positions," second-year Erie coach Jay Larranaga said.

Erie is in a hybrid partnership with the New York Knicks.

Knicks assistant general manager Allan Houston, who is general manager of basketball operations for the BayHawks, was in Erie for the draft.

"That's a great name in NBA basketball," Higgins said about Houston, a former star guard with the Knicks. "If he's running anything, you want to be a part of it."

The Los Angeles D-Fenders picked former NBA veteran point guard Jamaal Tinsley, 33, with the first overall pick in the draft.

A 6-foot 5-inch, 190-pound guard, Higgins, 22, the son of former NBA player and Charlotte Bobcats president of basketball operations Rod Higgins, averaged 16.1 points as a senior in 2010-11.

"Cory Higgins had an incredible college career at Colorado," Larranaga said. "Everything we heard about him, he's just a quality person. Hard worker. Very skilled."

Higgins said he can play both point guard and shooting guard. As a senior, he averaged 2.5 assists and 2.1 turnovers.

"We wanted to get some combo guards, some scoring and shooting and defense, and in Cory Higgins, he was a very good player," Houston said. "When he came up, we were happy."

In Daniels, Erie gets a 7-foot, 265-pound big man who has played overseas in Puerto Rico and South Korea.

Out of Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, Daniels, 27, averaged 15.2 points and 8.8 rebounds for KCC Egis (South Korea) in 2010-11.

"I'm hoping to bring some 'W's," Daniels said. "I play inside and out. I can be a dominant player on the block. If the player

is too big, I can take him outside."

Daniels has a familiarity with the BayHawks in that he's friends with power forward Ivan Johnson, who led Erie in scoring and rebounding last season.

Daniels and Johnson are both from San Antonio.

Larranaga said Johnson texted him about Daniels when Erie was preparing for the draft.

"Ivan is like our GM," joked Larranaga after the draft.

Like Higgins, Daniels is excited about the BayHawks being affiliated with the Knicks.

"I would love to get the opportunity to go and play for the Knicks," Daniels said. "I've just got to put in the work."

Erie also selected former BayHawks forward Taj McCullough in the second round.

In their expansion season, the BayHawks picked McCullough, 25, in the second round of the 2008 draft. The 6-foot 7-inch, 225-pound forward out of Winthrop averaged 6.5 points in eight games for the BayHawks before injuring his knee and being released.

Picked up by Fort Wayne, McCullough averaged 15.6 points in 44 games.

"I think his game, he's a skilled big guy, which there is a premium on in (Knicks coach Mike D'Antoni's) offense," Larranaga said. "Keep the floor spread. Daniels can do it. McCullough can do it."

Before the draft, the BayHawks traded one of their two second-round picks to Idaho for veteran Jeff Graves.

"We need some size," Houston said before the draft. "We've talked to his guy. Hopefully, he's in shape and hopefully that will help. Coming in and having that time early to get in shape."

A 6-foot 9-inch, 270-pound forward, Graves, 30, was on Kansas' 2003 Final Four team. He last played professionally in 2009 for Idaho before suffering a knee injury in the second game of the 2009-10 season.

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