



Surviving slump could become Mason Crosby's turning point

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Kicker bounced back from worst struggles of his career to finish strong



GREEN BAY—No player had his mental state questioned and discussed more than **Mason Crosby** in 2012, but the veteran kicker believes the most trying season of his career toughened him for the future.

“As far as the adversity I went through this year, it could have broken me,” Crosby said shortly after the season ended. “But it didn’t, and I think I’ve gotten stronger because of it.”

Crosby never really discussed whether his issues were mental or mechanical. Most likely it was a combination of both. He answered plenty of questions after the rough games and in the weeks leading up to the next ones, but he wasn’t in the mood to delve into too many details, and it’s hard to blame him.

Whatever he discovered about himself and his craft along the way should only work to his advantage now. Having survived the ordeal and re-discovered some consistency down the stretch, it’s entirely plausible Crosby will emerge a better kicker in 2013 than he otherwise might have. Special Teams Coordinator Shawn Slocum believes that will be the case.

“No question,” Slocum said. “I think dealing with adversity can help you grow, as a player, as an individual. He just needs to put it together and have a good year.”

The Packers are counting on it. That’s why they stuck with Crosby when the fan base was howling for a replacement as he scuffled through a 10-game stretch that saw him miss 12 of 24 field goal attempts.

Nobody could have seen the slump coming. Crosby was coming off the best season of his career, when he made 86 percent of his field goal tries (24 of 28) in 2011. It marked the first time he had eclipsed 80 percent – a benchmark of sorts for strong-legged kickers who attempt several 50-plus-yarders like Crosby – after coming up just short of the mark four years running.

Then he began 2012 with five consecutive field goals, including makes from 48 and 54 yards in Week 2 against Chicago, before his first two misses of the season, both 50-plus attempts in Week 5 at Indianapolis.

The two misses cost the Packers dearly in a game they lost by three points, and both of them took wild turns off Crosby's foot. The veteran kicker wouldn't truly find his stroke again for the next two months. He missed right and left. He clanked a couple off the uprights. Even two of his makes deflected off an upright and bounced through.

While some wondered whether bringing in another kicker as competition would motivate Crosby, he repeatedly said he had plenty of motivation every time he looked at his teammates around the locker room. He wanted to be accountable to them, and to the coaching staff that stood behind him.

"The adversity I've dealt with this year is definitely the most I've dealt with in my kicking career thus far," Crosby said. "I think it showed my character, it showed how hard I work, and the things that I really put into it, my passion and my love for this game."

No one, least of all Slocum, ever questioned that.

"He kept his head down and continued to work and finished on a good note," Slocum said.

The good note was six consecutive field goals over the final two regular-season games and two postseason contests. If there was a moment to single out as the turning point, it was probably the 51-yarder on the final play of the first half at the Metrodome in Week 17.

With the Packers down, 20-7, it was a clutch kick and his first make from 50-plus following seven straight misses. A subsequent 40-yarder early in the fourth quarter to tie the score at 27 carried even more pressure, and Crosby nailed it. His last kick was a 31-yarder early in the third quarter in San Francisco to tie that game at 24.

As the coaching and personnel staffs go through their offseason evaluations, there's always a chance another kicker could be brought in to compete with Crosby in 2013. Time will tell, but after what Crosby went through in 2012, perhaps no challenge would be too great to overcome.

"That's not anything that can even be on my mind," he said of potential competition for next season. "I'm just going to get back to work like I normally do in the offseason and just focus on that. All I can control is what I do and my process."

"I was happy at the end of the year. I tried to be accountable to my teammates and this organization and do my job and do my role and be consistent. Finishing strong was important. Obviously, I'm upset and disappointed we didn't finish as a team."

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