

## Surging Crosby aims to reward Packers' patience through slump

*Written by Weston Hodkiewicz Press-Gazette Media*

*Jan. 17*

packersnews.com

Even in his darkest professional hour, Mason Crosby never feared what one more missed field goal might mean for his employment with the Green Bay Packers.

While the perception in today's NFL has every kicker who's missed a field goal filling out job applications the following week, that wasn't the approach the Packers chose to take with their sixth-year kicker.

Both sides agreed, however, things needed to change.

Then, when it seemed like things couldn't get any worse after Crosby missed two more field goals from 42 and 43 yards during an eight-point win over Chicago on Dec. 16, something strange happened.

The freefall finally stopped.

On that chilly Sunday afternoon at Soldier Field, Crosby's field goal conversion rate bottomed out at 58.6 percent, while Bears journeyman kicker Olindo Mare made both of his attempts despite being unemployed the week before.

While the critics howled, Crosby kept his cool. Inside the visiting locker room, he answered all the questions. No, he wasn't worried if he'd fallen out of favor. Yes, the conditions were fine to kick in.

The following week, as 70,508 at Lambeau Field watched with bated breath, Crosby made both of his attempts from 26 and 48 yards in a 55-7 thrashing of the Tennessee Titans. The roar continued seven days later against Minnesota when Crosby nailed two more crucial kicks in a narrow 37-34 loss.

Just like that, Crosby was rolling again.

"It's not like some magic ball," said Crosby of the three-game turnaround. "I've been putting in the work every week and just had a couple that get away from you. It's disappointing. I hate missing more than anything, so for me it's fine-tuning every little detail I can put into it and ultimately go out and having some fun."

Aside from a recent bout with the flu, Crosby is enjoying himself again. He's made his last five field goals to bookend the five he made to start the season before the midseason slump saw him miss a field goal in nine consecutive games in which he attempted one.

That the slump came a season after notching a career-best 85.7 field goal percentage made this season more difficult, but Crosby maintained a positive approach.

A year after establishing a franchise record with 23 consecutive makes, Crosby set his sights on making the next one even when a 12-for-24 midseason stretch gave him a coin flip's chance of doing so.

"Every season kind of brings some different challenges even when it's all going right," Crosby said. "It was definitely something different. Something I've never seen before, but fortunate to be in a place where I've had the opportunities to continue to work through it and then come out of it, being able to hit some good kicks here down at the end of the season and kind of build some momentum going into the playoffs, personally and

for this team.”

Now, the stakes have been raised. On Saturday, the Packers will face the San Francisco 49ers at Candlestick Park with a berth in the NFC championship on the line. Each point serves a purpose, and coincidentally, the game features the three worst statistical placekickers in the league this season.

Unlike Packers coach Mike McCarthy, who stood by Crosby since the start of his woes, the 49ers opted this past week to sign 32-year-old Billy Cundiff to compete with their struggling kicker, 38-year-old David Akers, whose 69 percent accuracy was second to only Crosby's as the league's lowest.

Two years ago, Cundiff and Akers were kicking against each other in the Pro Bowl. This week, they've been dueling for the same job in practice.

A Pro Bowler in 2010 with Baltimore, Cundiff's career has been defined by Jekyll and Hyde moments. He made only 7-of-12 field goals (58.3 percent) with Washington before being cut after Week 5 and was on the street the rest of the season until San Francisco signed him.

Nobody relies on their kicker more than the 49ers. Since Jim Harbaugh arrived in 2011, no NFL team has attempted more field goals than San Francisco (94), and this season no one missed more (13).

“We're confident in our kickers,” 49ers rookie quarterback Colin Kaepernick said. “Nobody's going to be perfect, so we're very confident with anybody that's kicking the ball for us.”

If Harbaugh knows which direction he plans to go at kicker, he's keeping it under wraps with San Francisco only publicly offering that the team will go with whichever kicker impresses in practice.

Meanwhile, Crosby will handle the Packers' duties on Saturday night like he has all season — through the ups and downs.

“I think you look at what he's done his last couple games and how he finished the season, he had some tough times that he dealt with,” Packers special teams coach Shawn Slocum said. “I think it shows the kind of character he has. He kept working and kept applying his trade. I'm looking forward to seeing him kick.”

With a small grin on his face, Crosby admits this season has had its challenges. He knows all too well it will go down as the franchise's most inaccurate campaign since 1988 when four kickers — Max Zendejas, Dale Dawson, Dean Dorsey and Curtis Burrow — combined to go 13-of-25 for the season.

So did the Packers do the right thing sticking with their guy rather than bringing in another leg off the street? Saturday's kicking could go far in proving which approach was correct.

However, the Packers enter Saturday's game with seemingly one distinct advantage over the 49ers — they know who their kicker is going to be.

“Ultimately, that's what happened here,” said Crosby of the team not bringing anyone in. “They never lost faith, and I made sure I did my job at the end of the season and into the playoffs. That was important for me to finish strong.

“Obviously, I'm going to look back at this season and not be happy with the stat line, but ultimately I can look

at the positives and make sure I finish off strong. For me, that's the most important thing to still have a lot of games, a lot of season left if we take care of business."

— whodkiew@greenbaypressgazette.com and follow him on Twitter @WesHod.