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THUNDER NEWS

Roberson Visits Moore Fire Station

By NICK GALLO | Thunder Basketball Writer
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Moments after the horrific May 20th tornado ripped through the Oklahoma City region, Moore Fire Station #1 was a hive of activity.

As a major headquarters for first responders including police officers, medics, FEMA and other organizations, the fire station and the firemen stationed there were critical to the recovery efforts to both rescue victims and help families get back on their feet. As it has done all five years the organization has been in Oklahoma, the Thunder has continually tried to make an impact in the community. On Thursday, one of the Thunder's newest members, rookie Andre Roberson, stopped by the station to meet with firefighters and their families.

"It's a great experience, getting to see what they can do for the community," Roberson said. "It really opened up my eyes to see what really happened. Those guys, responding like that, shows how brave they are and how much support they give the community."

Roberson, the second of the Thunder's two first round draft picks in the 2013 Draft, brought his very friendly and comfortable personality as he took pictures, signed autographs and chatted with firefighters, their wives and kids. Deputy Fire Chief Greg Herbster led Roberson through a tour of the facility, while first responders Nathan Stager and Trent Wood showed him the trucks and equipment. It was evident that the spirits of the entire department were lifted to have a Thunder player come down and personally recognize their efforts.

"I think it was huge for our department," Stager said. "I think it was a great experience for us to see the way that the Thunder and the whole organization interacts with the community and everybody around them. I know that we all think that it's our team and they think it's their community. Working together and all being one, it's an awesome deal for everybody."

"It's great teaming up with the Thunder," Herbster echoed. "They're very appealing to the public. Citizens love them. It's wonderful to join hands with them and support our community."

The very inquisitive Roberson found out everything from the speed of the fire trucks to the size of the water pumps, but he also got some firsthand perspective too. After briefly trying on a full firefighter uniform, Roberson hopped aboard one of the fire trucks and made a trip down to the affected areas in Moore.

A visit to Plaza Towers Elementary and the hardest hit areas of Moore was a poignant moment for Roberson, and also one that built a nice bond between himself and the firefighters because of the mutual respect that has been built between the two organizations who help those in the community.

"Those guys are heroes to us too," Wood said. "We sit there by the TV and watch them every night and never miss a game when we're up here. It was really fun to talk to him and nice to get to know one of the new guys."

"He was an awesome guy," Stager said. "He seemed to be in good spirits and just like everybody up here at the fire department, we're all a bunch of big kids. He looked like he had a great time."

Since he was drafted, Roberson spent a week in Orlando with the team for Summer League and has been working hard at the INTEGRIS Health Thunder Development Center, so this was his first true opportunity to get out in the Oklahoma City community and make an appearance. During his time at the station, he made sure not to leave without taking every picture, signing every autograph and thanking every member of the staff.

As Roberson himself put it, he was "blessed" to visit Oklahoma's true heroes who save lives every day. He's only a few weeks on the job, but it's clear that Roberson understands the importance the Thunder puts on its community and the deep ties that have been built between the organization and the people in Oklahoma already.

"It's great to give back," Roberson said. "They give us a lot of support, so why not give it back? I'm glad I came out here and did this. It won't be my last thing I do."



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Training camp preview: Crosby has competition at kicker, Ross the favorite for returner

Written by Pete Dougherty Press-Gazette Media

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greenbaypressgazette.com

Special teams coaches in the NFL like to say that kickers and punters always have competition even when they're the only specialist at their position in training camp.

But it's one thing to know there are possible replacements out there on the street, and another to practice against one every day in camp. So this year will be different for Mason Crosby, who is coming off his worst season as the Green Bay Packers' kicker after having his best in 2011.

Crosby hasn't faced another kicker in camp since his rookie season of 2007. But his prolonged slump last year put his job in jeopardy late in the season and forced the Packers to bring in an alternative this offseason — they chose former University of California kicker Giorgio Tavecchio.

Sure the Packers are hoping the in-person rivalry helps Crosby find his best. But they consider Tavecchio viable if the 28-year old falters.

"Mason's looked good in terms of his rhythm and his technique this offseason, and it looks like he's hitting the ball well," special teams coach Shawn Slocum said. "Giorgio, one of the things he does well is rhythm, very smooth. He's kicked the ball well. As we move forward there is competition at the position that should make the guys perform and rise to the occasion."

Last season Crosby converted a league-low 63.6 percent of his field goals (21-for-33) and went through a mid- to late-season slump in which he missed 12 of 24 attempts and had a miss in eight consecutive games he attempted a kick. The problems started when he missed a couple long attempts early in the year — 52 and 51 yarders in a three-point loss at Indianapolis in Week 5 — and slowly bled into shorter kicks as the season went on.

If the Packers were going to make an in-season change, it would have come after their Dec. 16 game at Chicago, where Crosby missed from 42 and 43 yards. But with the playoffs only three weeks away, general manager Ted Thompson and coach Mike McCarthy stuck with Crosby, and the kicker responded by making his final six attempts, playoffs included.

"Mason's fine," Slocum said. "His overall production from a percentage standpoint needs to be better. His low point last season probably was in Chicago, and I thought after that he improved. He was approximately 82 percent on his field goals under 50 yards and was 2 of 9 on field goals over 50 yards, so you can look at numbers however you want to look at them."

"Bottom line, he needs to make the kicks we need. Field goals under 50 yards, he's got to make all those, and when he gets a chance to make a 52, 53 yarder, he needs to strike the ball well and give him a chance to make it. That's what we're looking for at the position."

Slocum, special teams assistant Chad Morton and members of the Packers' scouting staff scouted kicking camps and held workouts with unsigned kickers early in the offseason to find a challenger

for Crosby. They chose the left-footed Tavecchio in March after his strong workout at the Don Hutson Center.

Tavecchio went to camp as a rookie last year with San Francisco but had little chance of beating out David Akers, who in 2011 had made 84.6 percent of his kicks, including going 7-for-9 from 50 yards or more. Akers coincidentally slumped badly last season also (69.0 percent on field goals) but held his job after the 49ers brought in Billy Cundiff to compete with him for a week heading into the playoffs.

Tavecchio was Cal's kicker for four years and made 75 percent of his career field goal attempts. The Packers liked him enough to forego selecting or signing a rookie kicker from the NFL draft. He's small (5-feet-10 and 182 pounds), but he showed a strong leg from beyond 50 yards in the one practice during which the Packers' kickers worked in live action in front of reporters.

"He's got a solid swing," Slocum said. "Good technician and good rhythm. Ball comes off his foot well and he's got a good leg."

With Randall Cobb becoming a lead player in the Packers' offense, Slocum also will be auditioning return men in camp in hopes they can take those duties off Cobb. The front-runner is receiver Jeremy Ross, with rookie running back Johnathan Franklin and cornerback James Nixon among the possibilities as well.

Franklin didn't do any returning in college games at UCLA but said he regularly worked as a return man on punts and kickoffs in practice. Nixon returned only kickoffs in college — he averaged 25.8 yards on 41 returns in three seasons at Temple — but worked both this offseason with the Packers.

Ross has excellent strength (6-0, 215) and speed (4.44 seconds), and flashed NFL-quality return ability late last season when the Packers reduced Cobb's workload. He averaged 20.6 yards on five punt returns (playoffs included) and 22.8 yards on five kickoffs. But Ross' two fumbles were a red flag and mean he probably will have to be perfect in the preseason to win the job.

One of Ross' fumbles came on a punt when he bobbled the catch of a backward pass from Cobb on a gadget play at Chicago in December. The other was on the catch of a punt against the San Francisco 49ers in the playoffs that set up a short touchdown drive and helped turn that game against the Packers.

"(Ross) is very confident as a catcher of the ball," Slocum said. "He made a mistake in terms of trying to get off the spot before he put the ball away in San Francisco, and it cost us in a big situation. Randall two years ago had the same situation against the Vikings. You want to be very sure about catching the ball, but he just tried to move off the spot quickly and turned it over."

"We're going to move forward. (Ross) is strong. He's a strong runner, he's got good hip strength and balance, in the few return opportunities he had he had the chance to break tackles and I was impressed with it."

The Packers appear to be in good shape at punter, where fourth-year pro Tim Masthay has

shown a lively leg, the ability to function in bad weather, and improvement in net average each season (38.9 yards in '12, which ranked No. 20 in the league).

"I expect he'll continue to improve," Slocum said. "It's in his genes his work ethic. He's really attacked learning the position and becoming an NFL punter."

In coverage last season, the Packers ranked No. 10 in fewest yards allowed per kickoff return and No. 15 on punt returns. They didn't allow any touchdowns, and the longest returns were palatable (41 yards on a kickoff, 25 yards on a punt).

Jarrett Bush, Jamari Lattimore and Robert Francois were their best cover men and figure to form the core of their special teams again this year, though Bush could face a challenge from Nixon and former CFL cornerback Loyce Means.

"I would like for us to create turnovers more," Slocum said. "We had one last year against New Orleans but the whistle was premature and we didn't get credit for it. Those plays are huge in terms of impacting a ballgame. We didn't give up any big plays, fortunately. That's what our objective is."

Jaguars claim safety Ray Polk, enter training camp with full 90-man roster

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By [Hays Carlyon](#)

The Jaguars will report to training camp with a full 90-man roster on Thursday.

The team claimed rookie safety Ray Polk off waivers on Wednesday after he was cut by Seattle, who boasts one of the NFL's best secondaries. Polk signed with the Seahawks as an undrafted free agent in April. The 6-foot-1, 219-pound Polk played at Colorado, starting in 33 games.

He recorded 237 tackles and one interception in his career.

Polk will be expected to help fill in while fellow rookie Johnathan Cyprien recovers from a strained hamstring. Cyprien, the team's second-round pick, is expected to make his camp debut by the middle of next week.

Polk battled multiple injuries at Colorado. He suffered a severe high ankle sprain in the season-opener last year, missed five games and was never fully healthy. Polk also underwent surgery on his wrist and shoulder while with the Buffaloes.

During the 2011 season, Polk played through a cracked sternum after missing two games that season with a concussion.

Polk was not invited to the NFL Scouting Combine in February, but reportedly ran a 4.42 at Colorado's pro day.

Polk's father, Raymond, played cornerback for Oklahoma State and was drafted by the Los Angeles Raiders in the 12th round of the 1985 draft.

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