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Rookie Watch: David Bakhtiari

By Rob Demovsky

This is the second of three installments of Rookie Watch, looking at three newcomers who will play a major role for the [Green Bay Packers](#) in their season opener on Sunday at San Francisco.

On Wednesday, [it was a look at](#) cornerback [Micah Hyde](#). Next up, tackle [David Bakhtiari](#):



Bakhtiari

Next to Bakhtiari, the rookie fourth-round draft pick from Colorado, right tackle [Don Barclay](#), with all of four career regular-season starts, looks like a grizzled veteran.

So when quarterback [Aaron Rodgers](#) was asked this week what he will say to his young offensive tackles before Sunday's game against the 49ers, Rodgers kept it simple.

"Block those guys, please," Rodgers said.

For Bakhtiari, that likely means a matchup against outside linebacker [Aldon Smith](#), who finished second in the NFL last season with 19½ sacks.

"David is a very confident guy, who has a good set, and you just need to trust his fundamentals," Rodgers said. "He's up against a Pro Bowl guy who's one of the best in the business, who is continuing to get better.

"If you want to be considered an elite player at your position, like I know David does down the road, he's a confident guy, then these are the kind of matchups you want."

From the beginning, the Packers liked Bakhtiari's athleticism and intelligence, but they didn't expect him to be their starting left tackle. That job was supposed to belong to [Bryan Bulaga](#), who moved over from the right side this offseason, until Bulaga blew out his knee in an Aug. 3 scrimmage. At best, the Packers had hoped Bakhtiari might work his way into the competition at right tackle, where the second-year pro Barclay was battling veteran [Marshall Newhouse](#).

But the Packers immediately turned to Bakhtiari following Bulaga's injury, and he quickly eased their concerns. Though he allowed one sack in the preseason, he honed his pass blocking during training camp by often going head-to-head with [Clay Matthews](#) during the one-on-one drills. Matthews did not win a single rep against Bakhtiari during the practice drill.

“He’s shown he can block good players,” Packers left guard [Josh Sitton](#) said. “He’s done a good job against Clay. He seems very confident in himself. He just doesn’t let moments get too big for him. He’s a pretty level-headed guy. I’ve got confidence in him.”

Of all the Packers’ rookies, there’s perhaps none with a more important job than Bakhtiari. He’s entrusted with protecting the blindside of the quarterback who this offseason signed a \$110 million contract extension.

“I try not to think about that,” Bakhtiari said. “I just try to think about my job and what I have to do and try to perform at the highest level I can and to the best of my ability.”



Packers notes

Kicker Mason Crosby has big season lined up

By [Tyler Dumne](#) of the Journal Sentinel
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Green Bay — First, his employer brought in **Giorgio Tavecchio** for all of spring and summer. Then, they threatened him with **Zach Ramirez** the final week. For good measure, the YouTube sensation **Havard "Kickalicious" Rugland** was given a tryout.

And, oh, by the way, he needed to restructure his contract. This has been a strange summer for **Mason Crosby**. He responded with a strong finish, retained his job as the Green Bay Packers kicker, and now the regular season is here.

The team on the other sideline Sunday, the San Francisco 49ers, replaced their embattled kicker. **David Akers** is out, **Phil Dawson** is in. In Green Bay, Crosby stays.

These two decisions could be the difference in a close game Sunday.

"I feel great," Crosby said. "I feel very focused, very confident in what I'm doing every time I take the field to prepare for this game. For me, it's just letting loose and making sure I have good tempo, good rhythm and stay smooth through every kick."

For now, the Packers are confident. Crosby is confident. For a seventh season, he's the kicker.

The last two weeks, the Packers have had Crosby attempt longer kicks, while also toying with the wind. All along, Crosby says, it's been "the best I've ever hit the ball probably."

"I felt very good about that," Crosby said. "I feel solid going into the season."

Other than two lapses — one 3-of-8 nightmare during the intrasquad scrimmage, one practice with three straight misses — Crosby has been close to automatic. In the preseason, he went 6 of 6.

"Mason was very consistent the last two-thirds, three-quarters of training camp," special teams coach **Shawn Slocum** said. "He's kicking the ball really well."

Meanwhile, the Packers might pull him off kickoffs. Slocum said Green Bay would decide Friday whether Crosby or punter **Tim Masthay** would handle kickoffs. Both players, he said, can consistently kick touchbacks.

Mentally, Slocum sees Crosby in a good place.

"I think he definitely is because he's kicking the ball well," Slocum said. "At all positions, the mental part of it is a very important factor."

Crosby hasn't had many chances at late field goals in his career. That possibility, however, is what hovered above coach **Mike McCarthy's** week-to-week confidence in the kicker. Through the 2012 funk, he didn't waver. After exploring other options this summer, he didn't waver again. Crosby it is, for now anyways. Facing daily pressure, he kept his career in Green Bay alive.

On Thursday, Crosby said he wants the kick at the end of the game.

"Heck yeah," he said. "This is going to be a great game this weekend, a tough test early on here. I have to take care of every situation that comes my way.... I look at my teammates and I want to do great things for them."

Chemistry lesson: Since returning from his early August arthroscopic knee surgery, wide receiver **Jordy Nelson** has been running and cutting without any setbacks.

He's expected to be ready for the opener. Now, the question is rust. Nelson missed nearly all of training camp.

"Jordy looks good, he looks like he's back to himself," McCarthy said. "He's had a couple weeks to get ready for this, so I feel very good about where Jordy is."

Still, Nelson and **Randall Cobb** (bicep) both missed valuable practice time with quarterback **Aaron Rodgers**. And last season, missed time in camp didn't help **Jermichael Finley** and **Greg Jennings**. The passing game sputtered through parts of a 2-3 start.

There could be problems with rhythm, chemistry again. Offensive coordinator **Tom Clements** isn't worried.

"No," Clements said, "They've had enough history with Aaron and they've had enough work in the early part of training camp and even the last several weeks. That's not a concern. ...(Nelson) has been running full speed for over two weeks. So he's fine."

At practice Thursday, cornerback **Jarrett Bush** (ankle) was a limited participant. **Casey Hayward**, already declared out for Sunday, didn't practice.

Planning to hit: San Francisco's **Jim Harbaugh** is not thrilled with the Packers saying they plan to hit **Colin Kaepernick** when he carries out play fakes.

Three days away, the Packers really don't care. On Thursday, players said they have no plans to change their approach.

"I'm not really focused on anybody else's comments," outside linebacker **Clay Matthews** said. "We're really focused on what this locker room has to say as well as the men in here so I just think we're ready to play the game."

Matthews added that he does have a clear understanding of the rule. As for if there is a gray area, he said, "We'll find out."

"Obviously with the natural progression of the game with quarterbacks who continue to play fake, we'll see,"

Matthews said. "We feel good about our scheme and what we're trying to accomplish up there."

In [a video](#) distributed to the media, the NFL's Vice President of Officiating **Dean Blandino** confirmed that read-option quarterbacks can be hit even if they do not have the football.

"The reality is, the quarterback is part of the option," McCarthy said. "There's three options obviously — the quarterback, the dive and the pitch. The ability to go tackle that player is obviously within the rules."

And clearly, players have been instructed to hit Kaepernick when they have the opportunity.

"Why not?" safety **Jerron McMillian** said. "I don't see why not."

Though he was unaware of Harbaugh's comments, McMillian noted that Washington Redskins coach **Mike Shanahan** hasn't said much about **Robert Griffin III's** protection leading up to the opener.

Any talk out west isn't changing their plans.

"No, no, no, not at all," he said. "We're going to play defense how we play defense."

Stunting: In tandem, it doesn't get much better than **Justin Smith** and **Aldon Smith** on a defensive front seven. San Francisco's outside linebacker and defensive end have mastered the T-E stunt. The former occupies blockers, the latter loops around to rush.

For rookie **David Bakhtiari** and left guard **Josh Sitton**, managing the Smith stunts will be important Sunday.

"Everyone has different stunt patterns and different things that they like to try to do," offensive line coach **James Campen** said. "They do the one with the hump, with Justin and Aldon will come around. So we've put our time in there.... We'll be ready for them."

He added that both Smiths are "very precise" and "work their (expletive) off."

Justin Smith's tactics in the trenches have been criticized. Last year, New York Giants offensive coordinator **Kevin Gilbride** said Smith holds offensive linemen and "gets away with murder."

Campen wouldn't go there.

"I never really worry about that when people say, 'Oh, they're holding,' or this or that," Campen said. "That's all part of the game. It is what it is."

Undecided: Wideout **Jeremy Ross** had a strong finish to training camp and says he's ready to return punts and kicks for the Packers.

But a decision, Slocum says, has not been made. Citing that **Randall Cobb** is "in the picture," he said the Packers would decide on their returners Friday. Slocum also mentioned **Micah Hyde** on punts and **Johnathan Franklin** on kicks as options.

"When you've got those kinds of guys," he said, "it gives you options to do different things."