

Interview with Jeff Reed, Pittsburgh Steelers kicker

by Mike Herman, exclusive to Footballguys.com

During his junior year in college at North Carolina in 2000, Reed won the kicking job as a walk-on, and then proceeded to earn a scholarship with his results. In that first year he was also a semifinalist for the Lou Groza Award. Although he failed to win the kicking job with the New Orleans Saints during pre-season of his rookie year in 2002, he landed a temporary job with Pittsburgh for the final six games of that season, and then proceeded to earn a permanent job with his results. He has remained the Steelers kicker ever since. His career field goal percentage of 82.65% is eighth best all time in the NFL.

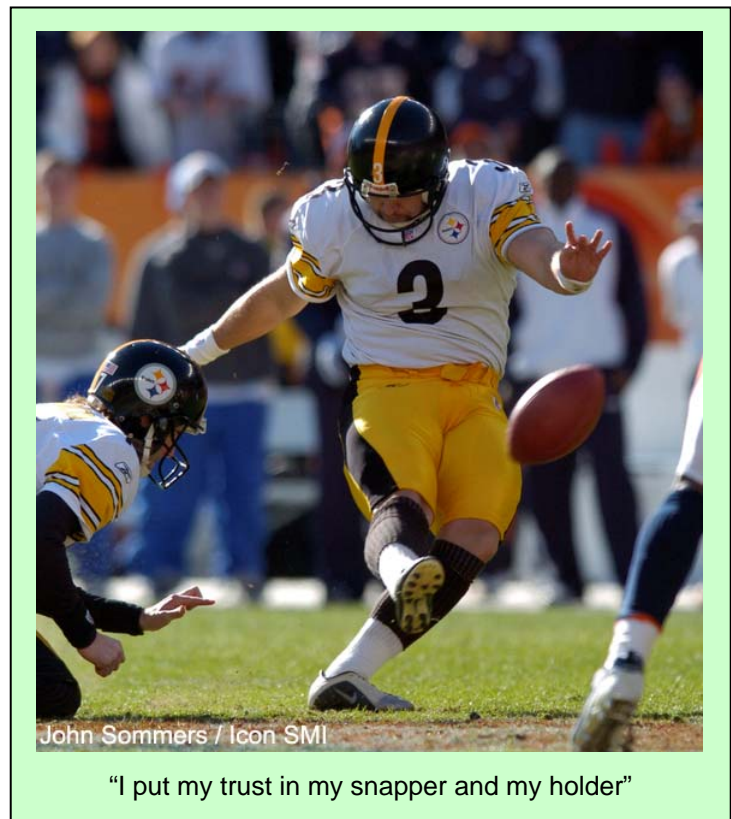
As part of Footballguys' ongoing kickology research, we asked kickers around the NFL a series of questions regarding the details of kicking. Following are Reed's answers.

FBG: Regarding the fundamentals of a kick: from set-up through the snap, the hold, and the actual kick, could you describe the whole sequence of a typical kick?

Reed: My job is in the hands of those guys (snapper and holder); not only those guys but the guys protecting for me because if they don't do their jobs, no matter what my time is, unless it is ridiculously fast - mine is not the fastest in the NFL, then I don't even get to get the kick off. Basically, I put my trust in my snapper and my holder and try to have a good unity with those guys. I totally trust the guys protecting me because they do that for a living.

FBG: Regarding different weather conditions, are there any adjustments you make when kicking in the rain? Wind? Bitter cold?

Reed: Whether it is windy or raining, the ball is not going to travel as far in cold weather. Depending on your strategy going into the game as far as kickoffs go, you can either drive the ball if you are looking for a deeper kick, although that won't have as much of a hang time, or use your normal kick and the guys know that your deep kick is going to be right around the eight-to-ten-yard line. As far as the wind, it is windy everywhere, whether it is Florida or Pennsylvania. You have to adjust. If you are a teacher and you are teaching a young kid to kick, you would say 'don't play the wind - use your fundamentals.' When you get older, you have to realize that sometimes when the uprights are moving, if you don't aim a little right or left depending on the wind conditions, you won't make it. As far as field goals, you don't necessarily have to change the way you kick in the cold, but when the field gets soggy, I take shorter steps so that I don't slip.



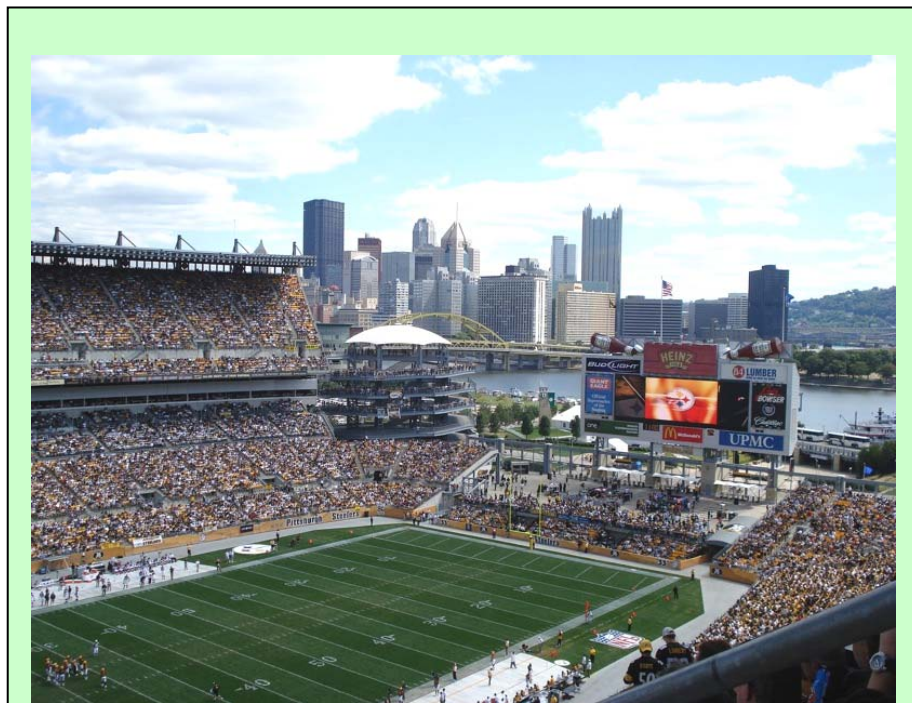
FBG: Regarding playing surfaces, are there any differences between kicking on grass vs. Fieldturf or other artificial surfaces, and if so are there any adjustments you make?

Reed: It depends on the kind of grass and the field you are playing on. It is easier on your body, whether you are a player or a kicker, when you play on grass. At times, when you get mud or sand, you have to adjust your steps because I attack the ball so I don't want to slip. Field turf is nice because you can always attack the ball whether there is rain or snow. Sometimes, when it snows, if the field turf isn't heated, there is snow on top of the field, so it is interesting, to say the least. I have had some crummy games dealing with that. Overall, as a kicker, I want grass. If the grass is slick, or it doesn't hold over an entire season, artificial turf is better for me because I can trust it more.

FBG: Do you make any technique adjustments when attempting a long field goal, as compared to a medium or short range kick?

Reed: If you hit a 35-yard field goal good, it is going to go 50 yards. Sometimes you think about kicking a longer field goal, and that is when you screw up. It is not because of the distance, it is because in your head you think that you have to kick it harder. Once, I attempted a 65-yarder in a game before; that one, if you get too much height on it, you are not going to make it. You have to drive it a little more. There is a point where when you try a really long field goal, they are going to bring a rush up the middle and jump to try to block it. That is when things can go bad for you.

FBG: Are there any particular stadiums in the NFL that you've come across so far that are more challenging to kick in than others?



Heinz Field, Pittsburgh

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Reed: I think that ours is the worst – not because I play here and that is an excuse for me - but because of how I can go from happy to play to ‘oh, it’s going to be one of these days.’ Other kickers compliment me (about having such success at Heinz Field), but I am not looking for compliments. They say ‘you can have this job’ and stuff like that.

Miami and Oakland have the baseball dirt – that is brutal. I have seen (Sebastian) Janikowski and Olindo Mare kick fine on it, while I have only kicked on it once. I didn't know how to play it but I made my only kick from the dirt, but I really didn't know how to play that. In our division, Cleveland is just as tricky as our field because of the lake (Lake Erie). There can be hurricanes and tornadoes in Miami so just because it is (usually) 90 degrees doesn't mean that it is always ideal conditions for a kicker to kick in.

FBG: Does the K-ball used in games really make as much difference as we're led to believe?

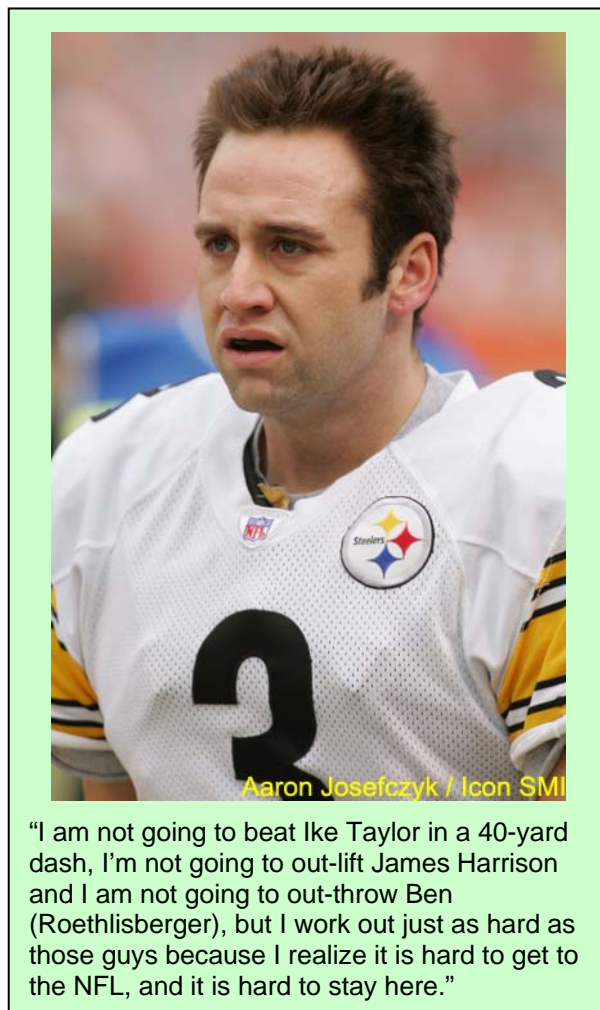
Reed: There is definitely a difference. I can't speak for the NFL, but I have heard stories. I never paid attention to or heard of a K-ball until I got to the NFL. You were able to practice with the balls all week in practice and then use them in games – that is what I did in college. Luckily, our quarterbacks chose the balls in college and they liked the older ones to throw. That benefited me with hang time and distance. It definitely affects it because you never know what you are going to get. For home games, your equipments guys rub the balls down. Our guy knows what we like and what other teams like because I talk to other kickers. When it comes to away games, it is either hit or miss because you get fantastic balls because the kicker and punter know what they are doing and they tell the guys (rubbing the balls) or you get the guys who don't know what they are doing or they don't care about the football, and it could be terrible. It can be hit or miss. I think that K-balls definitely affect kickers no matter what anybody says.

FBG: Field goal accuracy across the league has gradually improved over the years. The last two years have seen an even bigger improvement than usual. What do you think may have led to this?

Reed: It is kind of crazy. I look at my own stats because as a competitor you compare yourself to other guys no matter where they kick. At times you like to use the excuse 'he made all of those kicks because he plays in a dome,' but you still have to make them. It can definitely be a helping factor, but sometimes it won't make a difference where you kick. Either way, with human error, nobody is perfect. To see guys kicking the way they are, and I think I have a great percentage the past two years, sometimes I have not even been considered for the Pro Bowl and other times I'm an alternate when I thought that I had an awesome year and our team had a great year. If you are under 80% you are not considered very good, and that is crazy because 80% is 4-of-5, and I would take that all day. If I finish at 80% - that is my goal every year. Obviously you want to be at 100%, but as a human you realize that you are not going to make everything. There are 31 other kickers in the NFL and 500 guys waiting to do your job, so I guess you just put a little bit of pressure on yourself because so many games come down to field goals.

FBG: Is there one thing about being a kicker that most people probably don't realize?

Reed: You hear the comment 'you are just a kicker' and that gets frustrating. I wouldn't say anything to the person who said that to me because I have heard it a million times in my life. I work out just as hard as the (other) guys and I train just as much as the guys. I don't train for speed, I train for leg speed. I am not going to beat Ike Taylor in a 40-yard dash, I'm not going to out-lift James Harrison and I am not going to out-throw Ben (Roethlisberger), but I work out just as hard as those guys because I realize it is hard to get to the NFL, and it is hard to stay here. I think people have a misperception that kickers are outcasts and are the nerd football players. I am a football player who happens to be a kicker. If I wasn't a kicker in this sport, I would be playing soccer. People (teammates) love it when you make a big (kick) – when you miss one, somebody isn't around here giving me crap because I am a fool and a jokester. Deep down inside they know how I want to make every kick and be perfect. I was voted a captain, which shocked me, and that was because my teammates see my work ethic as a fellow player.



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