

## N.C. State's punt blocks inspire confidence

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N.C. State's Colby Jackson (48) blocks a punt by Cincinnati's Patrick O'Donnell during the Wolfpack's 30-19 win.

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BY KEN TYSIAC - STAFF WRITER

RALEIGH -- The way special-teams coach Jerry Petercuskie sees it, blocked punts by N.C. State have had a self-perpetuating quality this season.

The Wolfpack's recent success blocking punts has helped fuel its run to a 5-1 record at the midway point of this season heading into Saturday's noon game at East Carolina (3-2). N.C. State has blocked three punts in the past four games, scoring immediately on them twice:

- ◆ On Sept. 16, a Colby Jackson block against Cincinnati led to a fourth-quarter touchdown catch by Taylor Gentry in a 30-19 win.
- ◆ On Sept. 25 against Georgia Tech, a block by Asa Watson was scooped up by Jarvis Williams for a 1-yard return and the game's first score in a 45-28 Wolfpack win.
- ◆ On Oct. 9, Jackson struck again in N.C. State's 44-17 win over Boston College with a block (originally credited to Dontae Johnson) that D.J. Green recovered in the end zone for the game's first touchdown.

The three blocked punts this season already give N.C. State more than it has had in any season since the Wolfpack blocked four punts in 2005.

"It's like everything else that you do," Petercuskie said. "When you're on the field in a game and you have success, it breeds more success and they get excited. We've gone after a few more than we have in the past three years, and consequently, success breeds success."

Petercuskie said N.C. State's coaches have been more willing to try to block punts this season because of the team's improved defense. Should the Wolfpack miss a block and hand the opponent a first down on a penalty, the defense seems more capable this season of forcing another punt.

Jackson, who has two of the three blocks, said his personal success has come as the result of successful overloads by the punt block team.

"On the few blocked punts we've had, everybody's executed their assignment," Jackson said. "When you do that, it leaves a hole open, a gap. They can't block three on four, and most of the times, it's just one guy coming loose. Thank God, lately it's been me."

N.C. State coach Tom O'Brien said he urges his team to come up with one big play on special teams every game. So far, most of those plays have come from the punt-block team. It was assumed coming into the season that speedy junior punt returner T.J. Graham would make a lot of the big plays on opponents' punts.

But so far, he has averaged just 5.0 yards per return, ninth-best in the ACC and well below his career average of 9.3 yards per return. But Petercuskie said the recent blocked punts could work in Graham's favor, too.

"If you can put the fear of God in the protection unit, that's going to help you in the return," Petercuskie said.

To date, though, the punt blocks mostly have allowed non-starters such as Jackson (a reserve linebacker) and Watson (a backup tight end) to have huge impacts on the game. When less prominent players contribute, it can lift the spirits of the entire team.

"I think it contributes a lot to the momentum," Watson said. "Everybody on the sideline gets up. It motivates the fans, too. It gets everybody focused in. It can be a make or break at any point in the game."