



## MANY HAPPY RETURNS

NFL punt returner...it's a job that can be likened to running through a forest with trees sprinting towards you.

As a rookie last season, Chicago's **DEVIN HESTER** reminded everyone how an impact punt returner can change a game and enhance a team's chance to win every week by setting an NFL record with six return touchdowns – three on punts, two on kickoffs and one on a missed field-goal attempt.

"A punt return doesn't have to be a touchdown to change the momentum of the game," says Hester, who was selected to the Pro Bowl as the NFC's return specialist. "Sometimes when your team is struggling, you just need to give the offense better field position. Of course you always want to score whenever you have the ball in your hands, but we have an offense that can score at any time, so giving them better field position can be a huge jumpstart. You can't worry about scoring every time you return the football, you just have to be smart and try to do the best you can to help your team out."

Here are a few things that Hester looks for when returning a punt:

"Before the punt, I do a lot of surveying and observing. One of the things I do is look at the flags on the uprights to see which way the wind is blowing. That helps me determine how the ball is going to react when it's in the air or which way the punter may try to kick the ball. I line myself up accordingly and observe how the coverage team is lining up. The key before the punt is to put myself in the best position to field the football.

"During the punt, I look for colors. I try to visualize that. When we're wearing white (jerseys), I look for the darker colors. Where the darker colors are, especially in the red zone, I don't go that way. I just try to read the colors and it helps me out a lot."

Buffalo Bills punt returner **ROSCOE PARRISH**, who ranked third in the NFL with an 11.4 yards-per-return average last season, visualizes his returns before the ball is in the air and his goal is to get past the first defender down the field.

Some of the things that Parrish looks for when returning a punt:

"Before the punt is kicked, the first thing I think about is scoring a touchdown. That's the main thing running through my head. I also think about making the first guy miss. When I'm back there to return a punt, there's really no scheme because the guys are lining up the same way each time. The first thing I think of is making the first guy miss so I can get a touchdown or set up my team with good field position. I visualize it before it happens.

"Everything develops as the ball is in the air because when I get the ball, everything looks completely different. I wait to decide what I'm going to do until the ball is in my hands. It's all about making that first guy miss. Everything happens really fast once I know all the guys are coming down the field in their lanes. The play could go anywhere because they don't want me to go in any direction.

"Some punters do a good job of hanging the ball in the air. Therefore, I don't have time to run with the ball in my hands because the coverage is down there so fast. I fair-catch those but as a punt returner, you don't want to have to fair-catch a ball. You want to run with it, but you have to be smart about it. A punt returner likes a nice low kick."

New Jacksonville Jaguars punt returner **DENNIS NORTHCUTT**, who averaged 11.1 yards per return last season for the Cleveland Browns, stresses the importance of catching the football.

"The biggest thing in this business is catching the ball," says Northcutt. "Just like on offense, if you drop the ball, it's a turnover. You can't run without catching the ball first."

Following are some of the things that Northcutt focuses on when returning a punt:

"Number one, I try to look up field and get a feel for the guys who are coming down. I don't keep my eyes on them, but I take a quick look at them to try to measure how close they are. You can feel them as they get closer. Secondly, I attempt to find out where the ball is going and get under it. Most importantly, I make sure I catch it.

"You never know which return is going to be that one to go the distance, so I approach every return like it's that one."