

SENIOR RECOUNTS JOURNEY AS KICKER

story
Hyunsung Na

Deep sighs erupt from the stands as senior Michael Petro jogs onto the field. Fans are rarely happy to see the kicker. While he jogs over, he relives the thousands of times he's kicked a field goal from that spot.

He ignores the defenders, all assigned with the sole responsibility to block his kick and celebrate his failure. He ignores the crowd, now his captive audience waiting for him to deliver.

Instead, over and over again, Michael envisions only one scene — the ball sailing through the goal post. His holder, senior Colton Bedgood silently kneels beside him waiting for the signal.

Michael starts his routine. Three steps back. Two steps to the left. He takes a deep breath and gives a nod. The ball whips into Colton's hands, and he places it on the kicking tee.

Michael fires.

The fans take a sigh of relief when they see the ball go through the goal post. His teammates celebrate the three points. Michael tops it off with his celebratory handshake and head bump with Colton.

Kicking is Michael's key to impact the game. To have a future playing football. To connect with people. Kicking is his gift that gives back to him ten-fold.

But originally kicking was Michael's chore.

8TH GRADE

"Can anyone kick?" asked coach Drew Libby.

Practice halted, as the search for Downing Middle School's eighth grade kicker began.

Michael tried out on a whim.

He played soccer before and wanted to help out the team.

"At first, it was very frustrating because the ball wouldn't go as far as a soccer ball normally would," Michael said. "But, I just kept trying to figure it out and mess with it."

Eventually he did. Michael made 56 out of 58 PAT's, or point after touchdown's.



Senior Michael Petro started kicking in the eighth grade. Linebacker Colton Bedgood held his kicks in middle school and now holds them on the varsity team.
Photo Dylan Sorenson

Kicking was a new position for Michael's, but it was never his favorite part of the game he loved.

That was before his father, Ed Petro reached out to Scott Blanton, a former NFL kicker.

"He saw something in Michael," Ed said. "And he was really excited about working out with him, so that was a pretty exciting time."

But when Michael first received the invitation to a coaching session with Blanton, he hesitated.

"At first I was like, 'I just want to be a wide receiver, running back, one of the cool positions,'" he said.

Michael had shown clear potential, but it was more of a question whether he wanted to pursue kicking. The two went to the private session to find that answer. When he arrived, the reps kept coming and by the end of it, Michael understood how much more he'd have to learn.

"I was not that good. I got humbled very quickly," he said. "The things that he would make you go through is nothing I thought I'd have to do."

His dad, Ed, knew the intense training would prepare Michael.

"Scott didn't treat him like an eighth

grader," Ed said. "He put him in there with kids that were juniors and seniors in high school, some of the top rated kickers in the country... and in order to be kicker, you have to be able to handle pressure."

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- Michael Petro, 12

With enough time and private lessons, kicking wasn't a hobby, it became a possible future.

"As more time went on, I really clicked with what he was teaching me,"

Michael said. "I was like, 'Shoot, I should probably take this serious. I could go to college for it.'"

JUNIOR YEAR

It was time to prove himself. He'd done all the work to make varsity but now it was his chance to actually kick a field goal in week one against Jesuit.

Late in the second quarter.

Michael had a 14 yard field goal. But it was his first kick on varsity. He needed to prove that he could start.

He felt the opposing home crowd. His teammates' eyes staring him down. The air tightening around him. He took a deep breath in, took two steps and fired.

He saw the ball begin to drift away from the goal post. He knew he had missed before everyone else.

Heading back to the sidelines, Michael kept his head up as much as he could.

"Kicking is very mentally challenging," Michael said. "If you miss a field goal going straight out, it's discouraging... you can get really down on yourself, but you just have to be try to be as optimistic as you can."

But with a close loss, 34-38, Michael still felt the lingering sting of his mistake. After a couple of games, the coaches wanted to try something new. Michael was named the starter.

"I was happy," Michael said. "The hours I put in, finally were paying off, and I get the opportunity to show the coaches all the work that I've put in and just earn their trust."

It was 28 yards. Michael's first field goal attempt of the game was double the length of his first attempt of the season.

Senior Ethan Lee, one of Michael's closest teammates, noticed a vast difference in him on the sidelines.

"His Jesuit game, he was really nervous and wasn't completely ready for it, just not completely mentally prepared," Lee said. "Going into the Coppell game, he knew he was the guy and his confidence was way higher."

His holder, Colton jogged out with him with a simple message — "You're going to put it through, you got this."

When they met at the 28 yard line, Michael gave him a quick fistbump — "We got this."

He took his steps. He felt the same nerves but pushed them aside for his kick.

"It was actually a pretty bad kick," Michael said. "But it went in and that's all that matters."

He returned to the sidelines feeling looser, less wound up by pressure and anxiety.

"I was just relieved. I was happy and I will never forget making that," Michael said.

SENIOR YEAR

After his solid second half to the season, Michael continued the habit of tracking every kick he's attempted. This season, Michael has made every one of his field goals except one. One glaring mistake on an otherwise perfect season.

Against a nationally ranked Southlake Carroll at home, Michael attempted a 43 yard field goal. He took his shot but as the ball came off his foot, he knew.

"I remember seeing the line's face and the coach's faces, and just their reactions to it," Michael said. "I knew I missed, it was devastating."

As a kicker Michael's held to a high

standard. As himself, he holds himself even higher.

"I feel like I'm held to a high standard to make it, I feel like every kicker is," Michael said. "I don't like letting the team down and so every opportunity that I have, I want to execute."

But this year will be just one step of his ongoing football journey.

Having seen the entirety of his journey, from coaching him to now watching him play in high school, his father Ed just enjoys seeing all his work pay off.

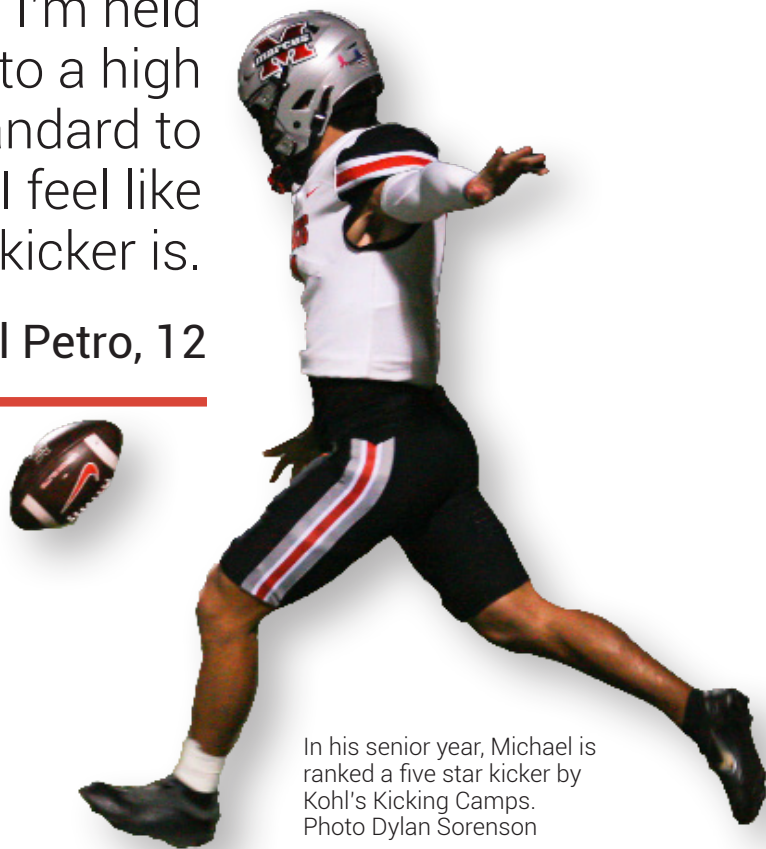
"There's nothing more I love than Fridays to go be able to watch him play and do what he does," Ed said. "To see the work he's done and be out on the football field in front of thousands of people, I've enjoyed every second of it."

With the rest of the season and his UTSA collegiate career ahead of him, Michael's journey doesn't have an ending in sight.

"I think surreal is like the only way I could put it," Michael said.

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In his senior year, Michael is ranked a five star kicker by Kohl's Kicking Camps. Photo Dylan Sorenson