SPORTS

Nelson back for Gophs with confidence, competition

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — When Minnesota took Philip Nelson's redshirt off at midseason, Gophers fans howled about the potential waste of a year of eligibility for a well-regarded recruit.

The upside to his earlier-than-expected experience is the extra confidence he can take into his sophomore year. Despite being the only quarterback on the roster who has taken a college snap, Nelson won't be without competition.

Given the zone read running plays the Gophers frequently use, the quarterback is prone to taking plenty of hits in this offense. So coach Jerry Kill's wish is to keep his starter fresh.

"Do I want to play flipping quarterbacks and all that? No. Is there a place and time? ... Yes, according to what's happening in that particular game plan," Kill said.

In 2010, Kill's final season at Northern Illinois, Chandler Harnish was the starter, but freshman Jordan Lynch took some turns and finished with 362 yards and three touchdowns rushing plus a handful of passes. Lynch led the Huskies to the Orange Bowl last season and a 12-2 record while becoming the first player in the history of the NCAA's top tier to pass for more than 3,000 yards and rush for more than 1,500 yards in one season.

"If there's a deal where you can sprinkle somebody in there, that helps you later on down the road and I think that's why Jordan has had so much success down at Northern Illinois," Kill said.

Freshman Mitch Leidner, who redshirted last year, is behind Nelson on the depth chart in light of MarQueis Gray's graduation and Max Shortell's decision to transfer. Freshmen Chris Streveler and Donovahn Jones will be evaluated closely in camp, too. Kill raved about Leidner's strong finish in the spring game.

"Once he settled down, he went toe to toe and we had a heck of a ballgame there. So I think that Mitch is like a lot of our whole team: It's going to be young and a little bit inexperienced, but sometimes that's good. They don't know any better. So you just don't tell them anything but, 'Go play,'" Kill said.

This is clearly Nelson's job to lose, but he has a long way to go. Nelson completed only 49.3 percent of his passes, for eight touchdowns and eight interceptions in seven games. After a summer's worth of workouts, he said he's got a stronger grasp of the college game.

"You've got to be able to be accurate and make the right decisions and just be able to utilize the players around me and let them make some big plays. Not every play needs to be a 50-yard bomb. You can dump one down and let some of the athletes take over," Nelson said.

He said he's also all right with the possibility of one of the freshman taking snaps from time to time.

"I want to be healthy, and do whatever we can to win," Nelson said, adding: "I think we're going to stop making the quarterback run 15-plus times a game. But at the same time, if that's what it may be to win, that's what you've got to do."

Junior wide receiver Isaac Fruechte noted Nelson's dedication.

"He was telling me the other day he watched the entire season from last year, even games he didn't play in, just to try and watch and learn and get better, and that's something that I've tried to do better too because he's been an example for me and other guys," Fruechte said.

The job would certainly be made easier by the emergence of a reliably productive wide receiver or two.

A.J. Barker, who angrily quit the team via a 4,100-word email to Kill he posted on his personal blog, led the team with 30 catches for 577 yards and seven touchdowns. Despite playing in only eight games, Barker's totals roughly doubled the next-closest player in those categories. Gray, who wound up at wide receiver, is gone and so is speedster Devin Crawford-Tufts, who is focusing on his track and field career.

Fruechte and senior Derrick Engel are the leading returning players.

Two of last year's most touted freshman are certainly in the mix, too, but Andre McDonald was recently reinstated to the roster after leaving school in the spring. Jamel Harbison is coming off major knee surgery after tearing an anterior cruciate ligament in the season opener. Sophomore K.J. Maye, who has also been used as a running back and kickoff returner, is another candidate. Freshman Drew Wolitarsky, who was California's all-time preps leader in career receptions (281) and yards receiving (5,148) at Canyon County High School north of Los Angeles, will have plenty of opportunities to earn his way onto the field.

Streveler and Jones, two other anchors of the 2013 recruiting class, will practice at wide receiver as well as quarterback. They'll have a chance to follow Gray's career path, which began at wide receiver and shifted to quarterback when Adam Weber was gone.

Vikings WR Thielen on rise despite D2 background

BY DAVE CAMPBELL
AP Pro Football Writer

MANKATO, Minn. (AP) — Cordarrelle Patterson and fellow rookie wide receiver Adam Thielen are training camp roommates with the Minnesota Vikings.

Patterson was a first-round draft selection from Tennessee, a player the Vikings coveted enough to trade four lower picks to move up and get. Thielen came from Division II Minnesota State and didn't land on the roster until after a weekend minicamp.

But Patterson hasn't bought into the notion his new buddy has a lesser stature because he's from a small school and working without a guaranteed contract.

"I love him to death, not only as a teammate but as a friend. I hope he makes this team. He's a great guy," Patterson said. "I could see him playing with me. If he would've come to Tennessee, he was guaranteed to play there."

Minnesota State was Thielen's only scholarship option out of Detroit Lakes, Minn., where he grew up rooting for the Vikings and trying to imitate Pro Football Hall of Fame wide receiver Cris Carter's tiptoe sideline catches in his backyard. He wasn't even sure he'd pick football over basketball when mulling his college choices.

But after a standout career with the Mavericks and some speedy sprints in front of NFL scouts during the offseason, Thielen wound up at the rookie minicamp with the Vikings, with dozens of other hopefuls.

"I was just going out there with a mindset to show that I belonged here. I had total confidence in myself that I was good enough," Thielen said. "I just wanted to prove that to the coaches and put it on their belts and see what happens."

Now he's trying to make the team. Veterans Greg Jennings, Jerome Simpson and Jarius Wright are locks, along with Patterson. So Thielen is vying with Stephen Burton and converted quarterback Joe Webb, among others, for what's probably the last spot on the 53-man roster. The practice squad also is an option.

"He's fast. He's got good routes. Everything about him is smooth," Patterson said.

Thielen has the benefit of running around on the same fields he practiced on in college. Mankato has been the camp home of the Vikings for 48 years, and Thielen used to watch Percy Harvin and Sidney Rice go through drills and take back what he learned to the Mavericks.

Now after workouts, he'll walk by the office of Minnesota State coach Aaron Keen and tell him how the day went. Another former Mavericks wide receiver, LaMark Brown, is also in camp.

"I wouldn't want to be another place," Thielen said. "This is awesome."

His route running ability has helped him stand out.

"He makes some spectacular catches," said offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave. "We have seen good things."

Thielen had 74 receptions for 1,176 yards and eight touchdowns as a senior last year, when Minnesota State advanced to the NCAA Division II semifinals. But he didn't attract much professional attention until after the season.

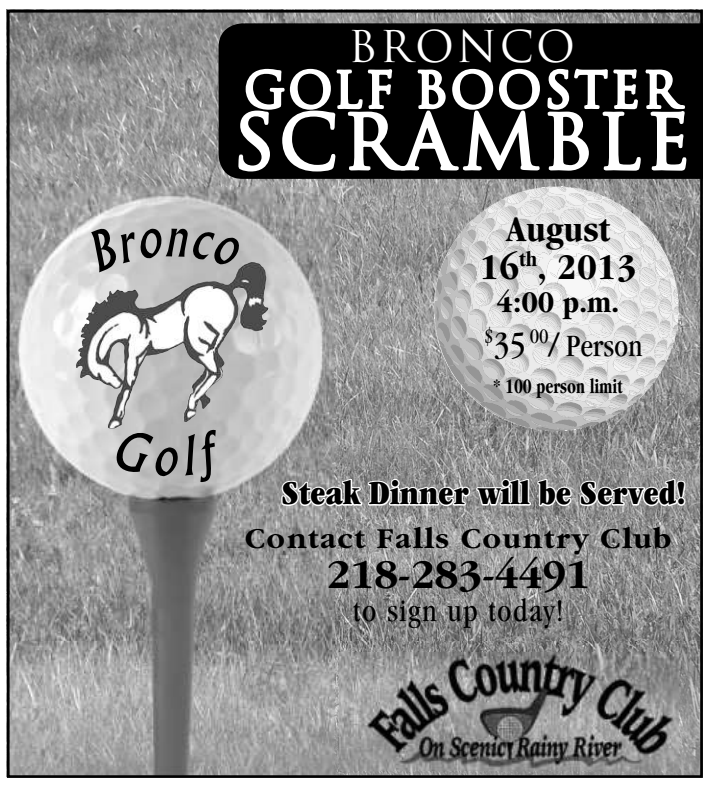
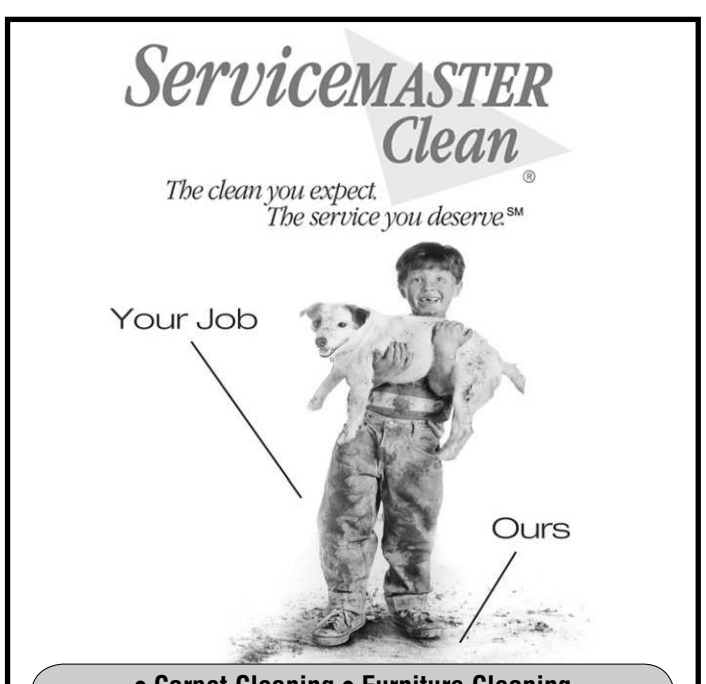
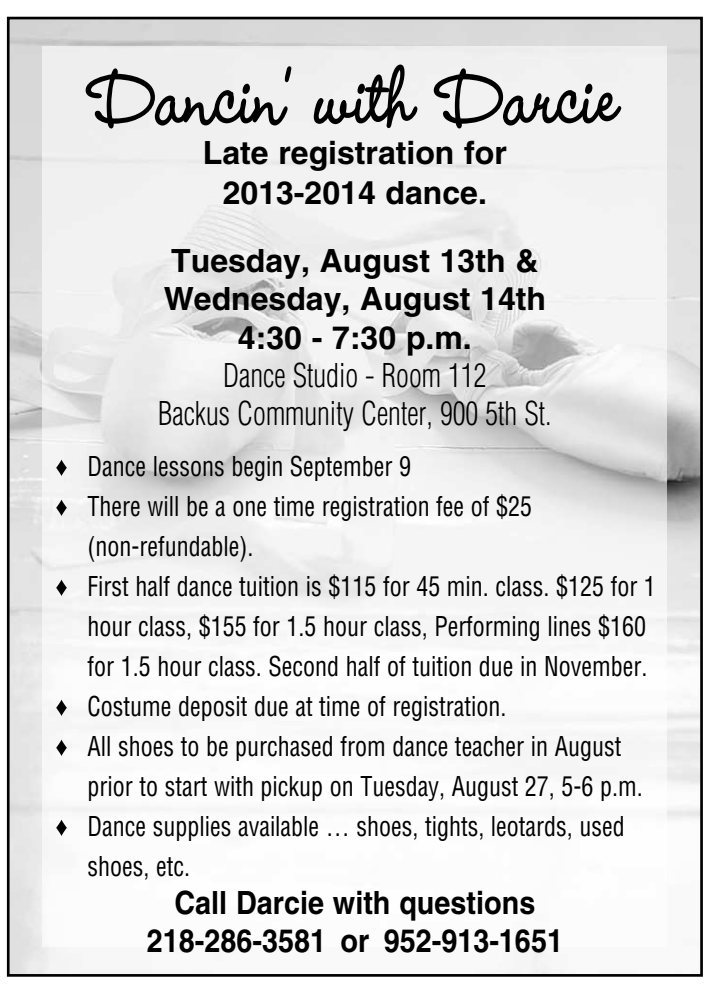
The 6-foot-2, 195-pound Thielen took advantage of the NFL's combine system, which gives prospects not invited to the main pre-draft event, the National Scouting Combine in Indianapolis in February, an opportunity to prove their worth in the same individual skill drills.

He went to Chicago in March for one of the eight regional combines, which require players to pay their own way. After running fast enough to warrant an invitation to the Super Regional Combine in Dallas in April, Thielen ran a 4.45-second 40-yard dash, according to some of the scouts who were timing him.

The league says 69 players who attended a regional combine were on a roster at the start of training camp, including 42 from the Super Regional Combine. Four of them were drafted.

"He was one of the faster players on our roster, but I don't think I had a good idea of just how fast he was or how fast he could make himself," Keen said. "There are a lot of people who get a free-agent tryout, and that's a one-day thing where you kind of collect your shirt and shorts and say you tried out for the Vikings and that's it. Well, Adam made it through."

The journey isn't over for the home-state kid.

"He signed about an hour's worth of autographs the other day," Keen said. "The comment I made to him was if you had gone to Green Bay or San Francisco, nobody would know who you are. And so this is a very unique circumstance that he's in. I think he's enjoying that.

"But also more than anything he's enjoying playing football for a living right now. I hate to put it this way, but it's almost like a fantasy camp for him. He's loving life. It's his dream to do this."