

Living The Football Life Upside Down

Former Chelsea High long-snapper has sights set on the NFL

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

Xander Echols' football career is completely upside down. Literally and figuratively.

Speaking figuratively, the Chelsea native's football trajectory has been unconventional to say the least. After graduating from Chelsea High School in 2020, Echols played at UAB for three years under three different coaches – Bill Clark, interim coach Bryant Vincent, and a tumultuous season under Trent Dilfer.

Needing a change of scenery and a fresh start, Echols resurfaced 2,000 miles away in Big Sky country, playing two more years of college football at the University of Idaho. A path starting in Chelsea, going through Birmingham, and ending in Moscow, Idaho, seems a little upside down if you ask this writer.

Echols' football career is literally upside down. That's because of his position on the field as a long snapper.

Many of you reading this story may have no idea what a long snapper is, and when he's performing his position as expected, the long snapper practically goes unnoticed. When things go wrong, though, the spotlight can be intense and ruthless.

You may only see the long snapper on the field five or six times in a game, during punts, field goals, and extra points. He's the guy bent over, head down, looking backwards between his legs, rear in the air, firing the football past his knees at warp speed to the holder or punter.

Unlike other positions where you have second or third down to try again after an incomplete pass or a two-yard run when the team needs five, the long snapper has to deliver the goods every time he runs on the field. He must be precise every single time.

If not, the chances of ending up on the ESPN bloopers reel are extraordinarily high.





"It's not the most glamorous position on the football field," admitted Echols while taking a break from packing to fly back home to Birmingham. "If you don't do your job perfectly, the chances of the ball game flipping are huge."

"It's a very fast operation between not just me and the punter, or me, the holder, and the kicker. I can't do my job without them, and they can't do their job without me," says Echols. "If I mess up, I may have to wait 20 minutes to redeem myself."

Like many kids, Echols began his football career as a youngster in the Pee Wee leagues, playing many positions while learning to play the game. However, Echols and his coaches discovered he was uniquely gifted at long snapper after giving him a shot at center in the fifth grade. He's been a specialist at that position ever since.

"I was snapping the ball so fast that our quarterback could not get his hands up in time to catch it," explains Echols. "I found long snapping with that kind of ball speed actually helped, so I ended up transferring and doing that all through middle school and high school."

He developed into one of the top long snappers in the nation in high school, with many recruiting services ranking him among the top 30, including Kohl's Professional Camps. During the Kohl's showcase in June 2021 – his senior year at Chelsea – he was ranked No. 29 in the nation with an average snap speed of .68 seconds, or approximately 48 miles per hour.

As a comparison, the NFL long snappers average between .65 and .75 seconds per snap. Echols was firing balls in that range while in high school. Despite his obvious talent for the position, many major colleges are reluctant to offer scholarship spots to long snappers, especially freshmen. So Echols accepted a spot on the UAB football team playing for Clark, square in the middle of the program's triumphant return.

"It was amazing. I got an opportunity that not a lot of other people have, except for the guys on that team," says Echols. "We beat BYU

later that year in the bowl game, which was fantastic because they were ranked No. 13 at the time, which was the highest-ranked team UAB had ever beaten. So it was just a great time.

"He (Clark) was a great mentor because he wasn't just there as a coach. He was there to improve you as a person and improve you as a player, which was fantastic," Echols adds. "Sometimes football can become just business, but Clark wasn't like that at all."

After his third year at UAB, Echols entered the transfer portal and received offers from a handful of smaller Division I universities, like Louisiana-Monroe, Alabama A&M, and Georgia Southern. He chose the University of Idaho, located in Moscow, where he excelled for two seasons.

While in Moscow, he played on a team that almost defeated a highly ranked Oregon and went 10-4 in 2024. Echols said he liked the coaching staff, which reminded him of his one season under Clark. However, he was unprepared for the Idaho weather when he stepped off the plane in January 2024.

"It was 64 back at home, I was in shorts and a sweatshirt, and flew up here, and it was negative 18. I was like 'y'all didn't tell me about this.' I went to Walmart and bought every thermal they had," says Echols, adding that Idaho's domed stadium, the P1FCU Kibbie Dome, made playing football in the extreme climate bearable.

Echols graduated with a degree in criminology, but currently has his eyes on a shot at the pro level. He is preparing for an NFL combine in Naples, Florida, this month, followed by a pro scouting event in Idaho this March. Whatever happens next, Echols is certain it will turn his life upside down, literally and figuratively.

"It's been a heck of a journey. More in-depth, twists and turns than just those little high points," says Echols, "but it's definitely been a fun one, that's for sure."