



Photo courtesy of Baltimore Ravens/Phil Hoffman

BALTIMORE RAVENS KICKER JUSTIN TUCKER

By Cate Reynolds

Whether it's on centerstage or the 50-yard line, Baltimore Ravens kicker Justin Tucker continuously amazes his audiences. The 29-year-old ranks as one of the best placekickers in NFL history, despite coming into the league as an undrafted free agent in 2012.

The Ravens saw Tucker's potential and signed him in May of that year. After an impressive preseason, he earned himself the starting job over veteran Billy Cundiff, who the Ravens later released.

Tucker has developed into the most accurate kicker in NFL history at 90.2 percent, connecting on 202 of 224 field goal attempts entering this season. He holds the single-season, franchise-record 141 points, and has kicked 12 game-winning field goals, including a team-record 61-yarder. The Ravens rewarded him with a four-year, \$16.8 million contract extension in 2016.

"He's made some clutch kicks," Ravens punter Sam Koch says. "He's been consistent at that."

Besides a strong leg, Tucker, a seven-year veteran, also has quite a strong voice. The 6-foot, 183-pound Texas native is a trained opera singer, and can sing in seven different languages. He graduated from the University of Texas at Austin's Butler School of Music with a B.A. in Music.

"We hear him [singing] every day," Koch says. "It's all part of Justin. The guys say, 'There's two things he's really good at: one is keeping us entertained, and the other is making field goals.' He does both very well."

In January 2018, Tucker brought his opera skills to national television during CBS' *MVP: Most Valuable Performer*, an interactive variety show featuring NFL players with hidden talents. Tucker competed against five other players, including Ravens teammates Alex Collins and Brandon



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and I’m glad I got to share with a couple of my teammates, Brandon Williams and Alex Collins.

WHERE’S THE BEST PLACE TO SEE AN OPERA IN THE AREA?

I hate to admit this, but I’ve actually still never been to an opera. Which is kind of funny because of this storyline about me playing professional sports and also having this interest in classical music. I think the closest thing I’ve been to an opera in the last couple years would be going to see the *Book of Mormon* at the Hippodrome Theater. So, I’m like a quarter of the way there.

YOUR PERSONAL RECORD AND FRANCHISE RECORD IS A 61-YARD FIELD GOAL. ARE YOU EAGER TO BEAT THAT RECORD?

I don’t care about how far we make field goals from. I think the most important thing is making the most out of the opportunities that I get, wherever they happen to be from on the field. Making PATs [points after touchdown], to me, is just as important as making potentially a 61-yard field goal in the fourth quarter. They’re all important because we’re able to put points on the board.

HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH THE PRESSURE OF HAVING TO MAKE A KICK THAT COULD MEAN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WINNING OR LOSING A GAME?

I think more than anything, I try to think about the action and not the consequence. That’s something that Jerry, Coach Rosburg, had said to me

Williams. Tucker won the competition with his performance of “Ave Maria.”

We recently chatted with Tucker, who is married with a young son, about his interest in music, his *Most Valuable Performer* victory, and his success and growth as a player.

YOU MAJORED IN MUSIC IN COLLEGE. HOW DID YOU BECOME INTERESTED IN OPERA?

I got into music when I was a lot younger, probably in middle school. And then throughout high school, I was just more focused on athletics. As I was finishing up high school and going into college, I just kind of felt this calling to jump back into something that I know, I really appreciate and love, and that’s music.

My first couple of years at Texas, I was on a track toward a degree in broadcast journalism. I took my first journalism class and, no offense, I just couldn’t hang. I certainly wanted to get my degree, but I didn’t want to feel like I was in school all the time. So, I went back to, “Well, what do I love doing when I’m not playing football?” And I love listening, playing, and creating music.

So, I figured out how I could get into the music school. I had to audition,

so they could see if they thought I could carry a tune and, fortunately, I got in. Part of my degree required that I study my principal instrument, which was my voice, and I was singing in a style that was completely different than anything I had listened to or performed prior, which is singing in the bel canto style, or singing opera.

WHAT GENRES OF MUSIC DID YOU LISTEN TO GROWING UP?

My taste was all over the place. Anything from ’80s hair rock to ’90s, early 2000s post-grunge. Think like Third Eye Blind and that sort of stuff. Now, I’m in a bit of a punk phase, so a couple of my best friends play in All Time Low, and I listen to music like that pretty frequently. I listen to hip hop, rap. I love classic rock. I feel like every musician has said the Beatles serve as an inspiration to them, so I listen to the Beatles. My son, Easton, is obsessed with the Beatles right now, which is great. We’ve got some good tunes going at the house.

WHAT WAS WINNING THE CBS TALENT SHOW MOST VALUABLE PERFORMER LIKE?

It was definitely a fun and interesting experience. It was enlightening to me as to how a live production really gets made. It was a really cool experience,

early on in my career, and it's a pretty simple but important coaching point. And for me, that means having a wide plant, matching up my foot to the ball, swinging up and through, and trusting that Morgan [Cox] and Sam [Koch] are going to do what they always do, and that's serve me up a great ball to kick. Between thinking about it, thinking about each kick in those terms, and then just taking them one at a time, for us, that's a formula for success.

HOW INSTRUMENTAL HAS RAVENS SPECIAL TEAMS COORDINATOR JERRY ROSBURG BEEN TO YOUR GROWTH AND SUCCESS AS A PLAYER ON THIS TEAM?

Jerry's been extremely important. [Ravens Specialists Coach] Randy Brown has been extremely important to what we are able to do, and I emphasize 'we.' Morgan, Sam, and I going out there on Sundays and putting points on the board, just knocking down kicks.

There's a reason we're good, and it's because we have coaches like Jerry and Randy helping us iron out the details, day in and day out, and then we just work. It might look a little different than what everybody else is doing out there. It might feel a little different for us physically. We're not knocking heads, and we're not beating each other up all the time, or I guess at all, but we do work really hard at our craft, and we want it to show on Sundays.

IS THERE A SPECIFIC MOMENT OR GAME YOU CAN RECALL THAT FELT LIKE A REALLY HIGH-PRESSURE MOMENT?

Sure. There's a number of them. When I get asked, "What's your favorite kick that you've made in your career?," I don't necessarily think about any of the game winners that we've had or any of the long kicks that we've had. I think about one kick. It was on Thursday Night Football during my rookie year,

and we were playing in Pittsburgh [at Heinz Field], and I had just missed a 41-yard field goal. I pushed it wide right. And then the next opportunity that I had was a 39-yard attempt going the same way, and I remember thinking to myself, "If I'm supposed to be playing in the NFL, I need to make this kick.

And Morgan throws back a great snap, Sam gives me a good hold, and we split the uprights right down the middle in the open end of Heinz Field. I always go back to that kick. If I'm ever going to be worth anything as a professional player, coming through at that moment for my teammates, but also just for my own confidence, I think that was a really important moment for me.

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