

TOPIC OF THE MONTH FOR JANUARY 2005

INTERVIEW WITH JONATHAN NICHOLS AT THE SENIOR BOWL

Jonathan Nichols, a native of Greenwood, Mississippi, was the placekicker for the South Team at the 56th annual Senior Bowl all-star football game held on Saturday, January 25, 2005, in Mobile, Alabama. After a red-shirt year, he was the starting kicker for the University of Mississippi for four seasons (2001-2004). He was the 2003 recipient of the Lou Groza Award, given annually to the best collegiate placekicker. Jonathan attended the Auburn Kicking Academy before all four of his high school years and participated in Coach White's winter and spring clinics in Mississippi. He also attended "transitional" camp the summer between high school and college.

Jonathan graduated from Ole Miss prior to the 2004 season with a degree in international business. He worked with a sports training facility to improve his flexibility and leg speed as preparation for professional football tryouts. He has worked for a pharmaceutical company since the summer of 2005. Living in Jackson, Mississippi, he helps high school players develop, and he has begun an advanced degree program to become a pharmacist.

The purpose of this interview is to encourage young kickers, punters, and snappers to start early in developing their skills.

KICK-AID: As a high school athlete at Pillow Academy in Greenwood, Mississippi, how many sports did you play?

NICHOLS: From the time I entered seventh grade, I played four sports every year for six years ---- basketball, soccer, track, and football. My father encouraged me to use a variety of athletic skills and helped me practice. When one season ended, we moved right into the next sport.

KICK-AID: At what age did you get serious about maximizing your potential as a football placekicker?

NICHOLS: I experienced real success in kicking during the tenth grade. It was then that I started believing what I would do in college was kick footballs. I went to camp every summer, and I attended Coach White's off-season clinics, but I also continued to play all the other sports. It was not until I finished high school that I devoted sufficient time and attention to kicking. When

I realized that it was my job, I got serious.

KICK-AID: Did you attend camp after finishing high school? How important is instruction outside the coaching available through the high school and college football staffs?

NICHOLS: Yes, I attended transitional camp in early June. It was an eye-opener. I felt like an idiot because some of the other graduating kickers were so far ahead of me in preparing for the college game. Because of my other sports, I had not yet made myself deal with the need for consistency. I had to work very hard that summer to gain control. It's better to get started as early as possible! Football coaches do not know what to tell you about mechanics or mental preparation. Nor are they prepared to evaluate how good you are or might be. It takes years to develop a form that will fit the body you grow. It's really important to get guidance early and to receive instruction several times each year, both during high school and college. Teach other athletes how to observe you and evaluate your form. It's also important to develop a daily routine.

KICK-AID: Ole Miss has had a tradition of selecting excellent placekickers. You were scholarshiped with an intentional red-shirt year before taking over the starting role for four years. How hard was the transition from small high school to NCAA Division I-A college?

NICHOLS: I was used to relating to other players. I had played quarterback and defensive back all the way through high school, so I could appreciate how athletes at other positions might view kickers. You are in a locker room where everyone is bigger than you, and you are not a superstar, no matter how good your skills are. You are also much younger than the experienced players. When everyone thinks that you are not important, your personality must make you appear comfortable. I never felt out-of-place because I worked hard to gain the trust and respect of the other players.

KICK-AID: During that transition, what role did older mature college players have in your development?

NICHOLS: Les Binkley, who had one year of eligibility remaining, helped me tremendously during my first year. He would stay after practice and show me drills and stretches. We would frequently go to another field alone. I realize now that I was luckier than most freshman kickers. Having someone respond to your needs and take time to work with you is rare in college football.

KICK-AID: At Ole Miss, did you feel pressured to live up to other people's expectations for you?

NICHOLS: No, not really. I've always been secure about myself as a person and as an athlete. I have rarely cared what others thought. I know what standards to apply to my work, and I probably am tougher on myself (than others would be on me) when I fail to perform well. You have to have a short-term memory to be a successful kicker.

KICK-AID: What were your emotions when you were selected to receive the Lou Groza Award your junior year?

NICHOLS: First, I was grateful that I had been given the game opportunities that produced that number of quality kicks in one year. Inside myself I was elated but also very humble. Coming from a small academy school, I never thought I would reach the pinnacle of my sport. The desire was always there, but the idea of receiving national recognition was unrealistic. The reward for years of hard work was totally unexpected.

KICK-AID: How has winning the Groza Award affected your career?

NICHOLS: As with any national award, it lends credibility to a person's skills. My name is on every list of competent placekickers, and I now receive consideration for jobs with professional football teams. Although I have prepared for life after football, playing professional ball is now more than just a dream.

KICK-AID: To what do you attribute your playing success?

NICHOLS: Work ethic is most important. Working at things that will make my body better has been a priority. You have to take constructive criticism graciously. Your ability to listen makes people think that you are easy to coach. As a kicker, I must immediately forget my misses and move on without dwelling on failure.