

Small-Town South Dakotans Help Anchor Jacks' Defensive Line

YHS Grad Soulek Part Of A Home-Grown Front For SDSU

BY SHAWN MINOR
Jackrabbit Sports Service

In addition to being large human beings, South Dakota State University football players Cole Langer, Kellen Soulek, and Shayne Gottlob have a couple other things in common: They're all from eastern South Dakota and none of them played defensive tackle before joining the Jackrabbits.

That changed in 2013 when they each had to learn the position.

Dell Rapids native Langer was a linebacker and running back in high school, named South Dakota Gatorade Player of the Year, and was recruited to play linebacker for the Jacks. But according to coach John Stiegelmeier it wasn't the right fit when Langer showed up on campus.

"His body exploded and he never made it to the linebacker meeting room," says Stiegelmeier, who is in his 19th season with the Jackrabbits.

As a freshman Langer came in weighing about 250 pounds, but by spring he'd already gained 40 pounds.

"I ate whatever I could get my hands on," Langer said.

But it's not like he's a big blob. Langer stands 6-foot-2 and is explosive for his size, proven by his 36-inch vertical jump. By comparison, only six defensive linemen jumped 36 inches or higher at the 2015 NFL combine, according to NFL.com's combine tracker. All six were defensive ends and weighed less than Langer,

who is listed at 285 on in the program.

Langer also broke the SDSU defensive tackle squat record as a freshman, hoisting 535 pounds.

"From the first day I worked with him it was pretty clear that he was going to be special," defensive tackle coach Jesse Currier says. "He's the most physically gifted guy I've ever been around."

Langer started the last six games of his true freshman year and has remained a staple on the line since. A recent hand injury has limited him in the last few games, but he tallied three tackles and a sack against Indiana State last Saturday in a more expanded role.

Starting alongside Langer is Kellen Soulek, a sophomore from Freeman who played for Yankton High School. Unlike Langer, Soulek had some experience playing on the line – at guard on offense – and defensive end. But he still hadn't played the defensive tackle position before arriving at State.

"It's a tougher transition than what you'd think," Soulek says. "The biggest difference is the physicality – being inside the tackles and getting double-teamed as much as we do."

At 6-foot-5, 300 pounds, the big-bodied Soulek was scouted as a defensive tackle from the beginning.

"It was a no brainer for him; that was going to be his position," Currier says.



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South Dakota State defensive tackle Kellen Soulek (94) looks to help a teammate bring down Indiana State quarterback Matt Adam on Oct. 10 during a Missouri Valley Conference football game in Brookings. Soulek, a sophomore from Freeman who graduated from Yankton, is one of three South Dakotans who help anchor the Jacks' defensive line.

Both Stiegelmeier and Currier mentioned Soulek's improvement on and off the field. Currier said Soulek has quick feet for being such a big guy, while Stiegelmeier focused on his overall progress as a person.

"Kellen is very gifted," Stiegelmeier said. "He's handled adversity really well. He's skyrocketed in production, accountability and just being a man. I'm really proud of him."

Also improving in production is the Salem native

Gottlob, who started in place of Langer the last three games and leads the trio in tackles this season with 16.

Gottlob, now a junior, began his career as a walk-on tight end who earned offensive scout team player of the year as a redshirt. Then he switched to defensive tackle and had to gain weight, similar to Langer.

Gottlob has battled several injuries during his career, most notably to a knee and both shoulders. He even had

his appendix removed.

"There's something wrong with me all the time it seems like," Gottlob says.

Soulek jokingly calls him "bionic man" because Gottlob wears ankle braces, knee braces, shoulder braces, and now a neck roll after suffering stingers.

Gottlob's perseverance has captured his coach's attention and made an impression.

"For me, Shayne's story is the most special," Stiegelmeier says. "Who knows who

will be an All-American, but Shayne to me is a picture of life and pursuing your dream, and in his case having a ton of success doing that."

The All-American reference is a nod to Langer, whose talent at least opens the possibility of future accolades, but Langer isn't exactly pulling away from his teammates just yet.

Stiegelmeier uses a sprinter's analogy to paint a better picture of where the three are at in their performance.

"If you're starting a race," Stiegelmeier says, "Cole may have a 100-yard lead and the other guys are working hard. I don't know if they are catching him but they're running at the same pace."

While Langer has the edge in terms of ability on the field, Soulek apparently has him beat on a different playing field. The two live a block away from each other and often play video games.

"Madden is the main one ... Kellen is pretty good," Langer admits.

Every Saturday you'll see the South Dakota trio trotting on and off the field every three or four plays, but they probably won't be waving their arms around or screaming to the crowd.

"They're not 'rah-rah' guys," Stiegelmeier says. "Their work ethic defines who they are. Their focus defines who they are."

The defensive trio and the rest of the No. 7-ranked Jacks travel to Ohio this Saturday for a matchup against Missouri Valley Conference foe and No. 11-ranked Youngstown State.

Jacks Hit Road To Youngstown State For Top-10 Showdown Today

BY TYLER TEAL
Jackrabbit Sports Service

BROOKINGS – Last October, Youngstown State's Penguins edged South Dakota State University 30-27 to put a damper on Hobo Day.

This Saturday, SDSU will have the chance to return the favor by spoiling the Penguins' homecoming.

The No. 7-ranked Jackrabbits handled Indiana State's potent offense last week in a 24-7 win that limited the Sycamores' conference-leading offense to only 284 total yards on offense.

This weekend will have the Jacks battling a No. 11-ranked Youngstown team that stands for defense: The Penguins are allowing only 264 yards a game, roughly 180 on the ground and a mere 84.6 yards through the air.

The contest will test the Jackrabbits' offense which, after a tough loss to NDSU, rebounded by tallying 428 total yards against Indiana State.

Youngstown dropped a 31-29 decision to Illinois State last week, and SDSU head coach John Stiegelmeier knows his squad is in for

challenge this week.

"It's going to be a tough Missouri Valley football game," Stiegelmeier said. "They're very much like North Dakota State. They're going to press our wide receivers. They choose to have two, three safeties, guys that can double people up, because they have great front line. They've got a defensive end that is a dominant type of player, so they're good across the board."

Leading the defensive charge for the Penguins is defensive end Derek Rivers, who is second on the team in tackles with 26 and also has three sacks.

Behind Rivers on the field, but leading the team in tackles is strong safety LeRoy Alexander, who has 30 tackles and three interceptions.

The matchup between the SDSU receiving corps and the Youngstown secondary will be worth watching as the Penguins will need to contain not only the second-ranked wideout in the FCS in Jake Wienieke, but the rest of the Jackrabbit receiving core.

Wienieke is averaging just over 131 yards a game

receiving.

"With Wienieke's success, defenses are going to be focused on trying to take him away, so that will open up opportunities for other guys to make plays," said SDSU wide receivers coach Josh Davis. "We have a tremendous amount of belief in all our guys, whether it's Brandon (Andrews), Connor (Landberg), Trevor (Wesley), or Matt (Raymond)."

With all the attention on Youngstown State's defense, its offense shouldn't be overlooked.

The Penguins average just more than 390 yards of total offense per game and are led by quarterback Hunter Wells and the tailback combination of Jody Webb and Martin Ruiz. Wells has thrown for 927 yards and seven touchdowns this season. In last year's win over the Jacks, he completed 16 of 27 passes for 256 yards and two TDs.

Both tailbacks are juniors. Jody Webb has run the ball for 467 yards and four touchdowns on the year, while Martin Ruiz has piled up 395 yards and three scores.

The Youngstown offense

will be facing an

SDSU defense that is giving up 18.6 points per game. In fact, the Jackrabbit defense has been playing with a bend-but-don't-break mentality, allowing only 17 total second-half points over the last four games. They would have pitched a shutout against Indiana State if it wasn't for the freakish, backyard play of quarterback Matt Adam. He scrambled out of the pocket to connect with Gary Owens a 43-yard TD grab for the Sycamores' only score.

SDSU's defense was able to put the pressure on as it chalked up six sacks for a loss of 41 yards, including two from defensive end J.R. Plote. The defense recorded nine tackles for loss.

"If you're going to play at the championship level, yards have to be tough," Stiegelmeier said. "No team is going to win the championship without a great defense, and we're getting there."

Offensively, the Jackrabbits returned to form last week with the debut of true freshman Taryn Christian at quarterback.

Christian started in place

of the injured

Zach Lujan and promptly piled up 320 yards of total offense. He completed 15 of 24 passes for 221 yards and ran for an additional 99 yards.

The big question this week is what quarterback will be starting for SDSU? At this point, the answer is uncertain.

"Our No. 1 quarterback is Zach Lujan," Stiegelmeier said. "And you don't lose your position because of an injury. He leads the conference in terms of passing yards. He's a pretty good football player. We just happened to make the decision to play a true freshman."

It's a tough question not only for Stiegelmeier, who jokingly said to "ask him about the situation on Friday," but it's also a concern for Youngstown coach Bo Pelini as well.

"I don't know who they're going to play," said Pelini, who was prowling the sidelines at Nebraska last season. "It seems like a recurring theme around here – you don't really know what to expect. So you have to be ready for a lot of different

things and ready to adjust on the fly."

After recording his first rushing and passing touchdowns last weekend, the Sioux Falls Roosevelt product Christian wasn't the only player to have a breakout game.

Junior Kyle Paris had a season-high 12 carries for 49 yards and a touchdown.

"Kyle – I was excited about that," Stiegelmeier said. "In short-yardage situations he runs with his pads down and really did the best job at running back (last weekend)."

With the continuous barrage of stats, game story lines and emerging players, it can be easy to forget that Youngstown came out on top in the last meeting between the two teams.

But, some haven't forgotten.

For SDSU senior cornerback JeRyan Butler, the game is what matters. "I'm focused on Youngstown State and getting back there and getting a win from last year."

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