

Rocha gives J-Hawks special weapon

Written by Jim Ecker

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Nick Rocha kicked a 46-yard field goal for the Jefferson J-Hawks in their 37-20 victory over Waterloo East last Friday and nobody was surprised.

"I'm not exaggerating," Jefferson Coach Brian Webb said Thursday. "He kicks them 60 to 65 yards in practice."

Actually, Webb short-changed his man by two yards.

"My longest in practice is 67," Rocha said. "I had a decent breeze, but it wasn't much. There was a lot of strength behind that one."

Think about that for a second: Rocha was standing at the "other" 43 yard line - on the "other" side of the 50 - when he booted that 67-yarder.

Incredible. And here's something else that's incredible. He's transformed himself into one of the best place-kickers in the state without any special help.

"I have never gone to a single camp," he said. "I've always kind of done my own thing."

A coach showed him the proper steps, but that's about all the instruction he's gotten. He's done the rest on his own, in the weight room and on the field.

"If you're willing to put in the work, it turns out pretty well," he said.

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Rocha, a left-footed kicker, booted a 45-yard field goal this season against Iowa City High to break the school record. Then he booted the 46-yarder against Waterloo East to break his own mark.

He kicked three field goals last week against Waterloo East, which is believed to be a school record as well. His 46-yarder gave the J-Hawks a 3-0 lead, his 27-yarder made it 20-6 and his 41-yarder made it 23-14 as Jefferson claimed its first win of the year.

Rocha, who is also a soccer player, was on the football team last year as a junior, but was the second-string kicker.

"Just from the beginning of practice, his kicking has been night and day from what it was last year," said Webb. "Upstairs is what's really changed for him this year. His mentality. And every kick in practice, it just seems like it's right down the middle."

Rocha has connected on 6 of 7 field goals this season to share the lead in Class 4A. Heath Naylor of Ankeny Centennial is also 6 for 7.

Seth Johnson of Pella, a Class 3A school, is 7 for 12. Austin Vaughn of GMG, a Class A school, is 6 for 10. They are the state leaders after five games.

"It's kind of neat to see kickers and punters in the news, too," said Webb.

Webb had a surprise for Rocha in the locker room last Friday night in Waterloo when he gave his kicker the game ball.

"It was crazy," said Rocha. "He came into the locker room and he was like, 'I want to give it to someone who has really improved,' and I was thinking he'd give it to our quarterback (Layne

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Sullivan) who gained liked 300 yards. And he gave it to me.

"It's nice to see a reward for all the work."

Jefferson snapped a 10-game losing streak with the victory at Wateloo East and Rocha played an important role with three fields and four PATs for 13 points.

"It felt great," he said. "Every time I went in there I thought, 'If I do my job, the rest of the team will do theirs.'"

Ben Koering snaps for PATs and field goals. Sullivan is the holder. And Rocha boots them through the uprights. He has not missed a PAT this season and is 12 for 13 altogether on field goals and PATs.

Jefferson (1-4) plays Kennedy (3-2) at Kingston Stadium Friday night, so Rocha is looking forward to that game. Beyond that, he's talked to a few people about the possibility of kicking in college.

If you can kick a 46-yard field goal in a game - and kick a 67-yarder in practice - there's probably a spot for you in college.

"I've definitely thought about it," he said.