



BY ANDY REID

When the last leaves fall from the trees and winter begins in Ann Arbor, it's easy to imagine the town helped inspire Alfred Hitchcock's famous 1963 film "The Birds."

Giant flocks of crows — sometimes comprised of hundreds of birds — congregate in the barren trees, taking off from the branches in great black clouds at the first sign of movement below. The Washtenaw Audubon Society estimates there are as many as 20,000 in Ann Arbor during the winter months.

TAKING FLIGHT

Hard Work And Perseverance Helped Brendan Gibbons Turn His Career Around

After the Michigan football team finished the 2011 regular season with a surprising 10-2 record, special teams coach Dan Ferrigno called for a chilly outdoor practice in December, in preparation for the Sugar Bowl showdown with Virginia Tech.

While his kickers went about their business at Schembechler Hall, Ferrigno first noticed the enormous swarms of blackbirds circling the field.

"You know what? The crow has to be the dumbest bird on the face of the Earth," Ferrigno mused.

And Brendan Gibbons kicked.

"Oh no, that's not true," replied Gibbons, now the Wolverines' red-shirt junior field goal kicker.

"What are you talking about? They're not smart enough to get out of the cold! Birds flock and go someplace warm!" the coach replied.

And Gibbons kicked again.

"Coach, next to the African Grey

Gibbons has connected on 11 consecutive field goals and counting, the second-longest streak in program history, and has made 93 straight extra points, also the second-longest streak in program history.

PHOTO BY LON HORWEDEL

Parrot, the crow is the second-smartest bird in the world," Gibbons stated.

After a search on Wikipedia and a viewing of a YouTube clip of a crow finding clever ways to crack open walnuts, Ferrigno confirmed Gibbons' claim.

Since that practice, Ferrigno has taken to calling his kicker "The Crow." And since that practice, The Crow has made good on 17 of 19 field goal attempts, including game winners against Virginia Tech in overtime and Michigan State in the final seconds this season, and one

that sent this year's wild thriller against Northwestern into overtime in a game the Wolverines eventually won 38-31.

GETTING HIS START

In his youth, Gibbons dabbled in judo — a sport in which his dad, Shawn, was a two-time national champion (1977 and 1979) — and soccer before settling on football as his sport of choice in his sophomore year at Cardinal Newman High School in West Palm Beach, Fla.

Originally, he had no intentions of kicking; he was the team's starting linebacker and fullback. It wasn't until junior year, when an injury sidelined the Crusaders' starting kicker, that coach Don Dicus asked Gibbons to try his hand — or, more appropriately, foot — at kicker. Because of his experience on the soccer pitch, Gibbons seemed to be the perfect man for the job.

But, by his own estimation, Gibbons did not immediately excel at his new responsibility.

"The first couple kicks were really bad," he said. "I finally hit one good kick. It went through the end zone on

a kickoff, and I just started doing it. I hit a couple 50-yard field goals, and it started being more and more fun."

The following summer, he attended several football and kicking-specific camps, including Michigan's annual summer camp — and interest from colleges started to pour in. As a senior, he hit 10 of 12 field goal attempts and booted 90 percent of his kickoffs through the end zone.

As the No. 8 kicker in the 2009 recruiting class according to Rivals.com, Gibbons signed with Michigan, redshirted his first season and prepared to be the Wolverines' starter in 2010.

Gibbons missed three of four kicks — attempts of 43, 40 and 39 yards — in Michigan's first two games that season. He didn't attempt another until a 52-14 blowout loss to Mississippi State in the Gator Bowl, another miss.

Days later, Rich Rodriguez, the coach who recruited him from Florida to Michigan, was let go by the athletic department. Some viewed it as the end of a disastrous tenure for the kicker. Gibbons viewed the introduction of new Michigan head coach Brady Hoke as an opportunity to press reset, start from scratch and be the kicker he knew he could be.

"With the coaching change, everyone was on a clean slate," he said. "I worked really hard in the offseason. Coach Hoke and Coach Ferrigno believed in me, and I wanted to succeed for them. I didn't want to let them down, or my family down. I was a better kicker than I had shown the University of Michigan, and I wanted to prove that."

When the 2010 season concluded, Gibbons asked some friends about different kicking coaches and camps around the country. He zeroed in on Gary Zauner, one of the most respected kicking coaches in the nation. Zauner has 35 years of special teams coaching experience, including 13 seasons in the NFL.

Gibbons attended Zauner's pro development camp in January 2011.

"To be honest, when I saw him kick, he had a couple really bad balls," Zauner said. "But by the end of camp, he had really started to improve."

Zauner recalled that, by the end of that first camp, Gibbons had shaken off a rough start to win the camp fi-

nale kicking tournament championship over several other college kickers.

Gibbons and his father, who came to watch the camp, immediately felt a connection to Zauner. They scheduled a one-on-one session with the coach that May, and Gibbons came back for one last tune-up in late July, just before the beginning of the Wolverines' 2011 fall practice.

"I really liked his style of coaching," Gibbons said. "What he said made a lot of sense. I just bought into it and worked on it.

"We worked on a lot of technical stuff, just making sure my steps were sound and consistent every single time. Following the ball with my eyes, instead of keeping them back. A lot of people teach you to keep them back. This way is more fluent in the way your body flows."

Zauner started to see another, albeit less tangible, change in Gibbons, too.

"From when I first met him to now, his technique has improved immensely, but more importantly, his demeanor and how he handles pressure has changed dramatically," the coach said.

ONE MORE CHANCE

Neither Gibbons nor Ferrigno and Hoke have ever discussed the kicker's struggles in 2010.

"That was before," Ferrigno said. "That was a whole different set of circumstances. We have just kind of coached him our way.

"When I first saw him, I saw a very good kicker, consistent. We coach very positively here, and I think that helped him. I saw a lot of ability. He's very accurate, and that's what you want in a kicker, a guy who can make them from all over the field."

After Gibbons' highly technical work with Zauner in the offseason, he thrived under the tutelage of Ferrigno, a longtime special team coach who tends to work within the parameters of a kicker's preexisting form.

"Whereas we coach more within a kid's style, Gary can fix their style," Ferrigno said. "When he's kicking the ball properly, we know what it

looks like. I have a mental picture of it. I can tell him when he does mess up exactly what the problem was, and help fix it.

"But there are a lot of things that can go wrong, and as a coach, if you go crazy with all the little mechanics, you can mess a kid up. I have seen it happen, where you give a kid too much to think about, and then he can't do anything right."

Gibbons kept thriving. He hit 10 of 14 field goal attempts — and 52 of 53 extra point tries after having one blocked in the season opener — in the regular season.

U-M'S TOP-15 SINGLE-SEASON FIELD GOAL PERCENTAGES, MINIMUM 10 ATTEMPTS

Player, Year	FGs Made	FGs Att.	Percentage
J.D. Carlson, 1989	12	13	92.3
K.C. Lopata, 2007	11	12	91.7
Bob Bergeron, 1983	15	17	88.2
Brendan Gibbons, 2012*	14	16	87.5
Garrett Rivas, 2006	17	20	85.0
Remy Hamilton, 1994	25	30	83.3
Bob Bergeron, 1984	13	16	81.3
Ali Haji-Sheikh, 1982	12	15	80.0
Mike Gillette, 1987	12	15	80.0
Garrett Rivas, 2004	19	24	79.2
Jeff Del Verne, 1999	11	14	78.6
Jay Feely, 1998	17	22	77.3
Brendan Gibbons, 2011	13	17	76.5
Remy Hamilton, 1996	18	24	75.0
Garrett Rivas, 2003	9	12	75.0

*Bowl game numbers still pending.

And that's when The Crow took flight.

With the score knotted at 20 in the first overtime of the Sugar Bowl versus Virginia Tech — and having already made his previous two field goal attempts in the game — Gibbons lined up for a potential game winner.

After the kick, he famously told a group of reporters that he was "thinking of brunette girls" just before the snap, and that the vision quelled any anxiety.

But that's not entirely accurate.

"Kickers are always defined by whether they can make the big kick," he said. "You always get butterflies if you love the game you play. You'll get a little nervous for it — but that's good. I always just tell myself, 'Get ready to win.'"

Zauner was watching on television, and he may have been the first person, other than Gibbons of course, to know the outcome.

"They'll show a close-ups of a kicker before a big kick, and you can tell by their facial expression and body language," Zauner said. "When he was getting ready for it, I said to myself, 'Man, he's cool, calm, collected. He's Brendan.'"

The kick was true. And Gibbons and his shaggy look and beach-bum-cool demeanor and brunette girls found a special place in Michigan lore.

He made The Big One. But for Gibbons, The Big One was only the beginning.

That January, he made another appointment at Zauner's pro development camp and scheduled two more one-on-one sessions for the summer.

"There was a big difference after that kick," Zauner said. "That head was up, the chest was out. It was kind of like a proud peacock. It's like anyone who wins — you can just see the confidence that kind of bubbles out of him. It was a quiet confidence. He just came out and said, 'Coach, I'm here, and I want to keep getting better. I want to help my team.'"

"He works all year at his craft," Ferrigno added. "He doesn't just show up in August and start kicking He's focused, and he does what he is supposed to do. He works very hard, and I think the fact that he works so hard gives him some confidence. It's all year."

COMING FULL CIRCLE

Gibbons' high school career began inauspiciously, before he surged. So did his time with Zauner. It has been no different at the college level. Gibbons finished the 2012 regular season 14 of 16 on field goal attempts, a far cry from 1 of 5 in 2010.

Since he came up short on a 44-yard try into a driving wind at Purdue, Gibbons has connected on 11 consecutive kicks and counting, the second-longest streak in program history (Remy Hamilton, 14 straight in 1996). He has also hit his last 93 straight extra points, also the second-longest streak in program (J.D. Carlson, 126 from 1988-91).

"I have coached a lot of kickers, but



Gibbons has connected on 14 of 16 field goal attempts this season, including clutch last-second kicks in victories over Michigan State and Northwestern.

PHOTO BY PER KJELDEN

I don't think I've seen quite as big a turnaround as this kid," said Ferrigno, who got his first special teams coaching job at Oregon State in 1987.

Gibbons and Ferrigno have built a strong bond, laughing about crows and other inside jokes, sharing a big pregame hug every Saturday in the fall and, of course, working on field goals.

That bond has developed into a deep trust. Although Hoke has repeatedly stated that sophomore Matt Wilé would take longer field goals — and he has, making a 48-yarder against Michigan State and missing a 53-yarder against Nebraska — when Gibbons is feeling it, Ferrigno lets him rip.

"He has a feel, warming up," Ferrigno said. "It's just, his deal is he is very accurate. When Matt kicks the ball, everyone goes, 'Whoa!' because he has this thunder leg. When Brendan kicks it, it's like, 'OK, it's going through.' He doesn't have the wow factor, but it goes through."

Before every game, the kicker tests out his leg against the turf, the weather conditions and other factors,

all of which can vary the length and accuracy of his kicks.

After warm-ups in Lincoln, Gibbons told Ferrigno he was good for much farther out than his normal game range. Ferrigno simply said, "alright," and later that night, Gibbons booted a 53-yarder against the Cornhuskers, a career long by nine yards.

"Coach Ferrigno and Coach Hoke instill confidence in me," Gibbons said. "And I want to give them the confidence that I'm going out there to do my job for the team, for the seniors. The year has been good, and I hope it can continue. I just want to keep doing well for the seniors."

Although his kick against Virginia Tech was more high profile, Gibbons points to the 38-yard game winner he snuck inside the uprights with five seconds remaining to lift the Wolverines over Michigan State 12-10 for their first victory in the in-state rivalry since 2007 as his favorite kick.

Oozing the confidence he has fostered over the last two seasons, Gibbons said Michigan State's attempt

to ice him with a timeout before the kick was "kind of pointless" after the game.

"Everyone said, 'Gibby, go win the game for us,' so I went out there and won the game," he said. "I was thinking about the seniors. That was my main goal, winning it for them."

"He was fine before the kick, the same as he is kicking at practice," Ferrigno added. "You really don't notice much difference, and that's what you enjoy. He's pretty even-keeled. He doesn't let much bother him, at least since we've been around him. Not a lot of peaks and valleys in his emotions.

"I have coached some guys who just can't take it. Or they miss a kick or two and now it's that the holder is bad or the snap is no good or the protection is soft. You'll never hear that from him — *ever*. He never makes an excuse. He fulfills his job, he takes it very seriously, and he is going to make the kick."

Zauner has watched as many Michigan games as possible the last few years. Whereas he usually sends his kickers a few pointers after games, he usually just calls Gibbons to congratulate him after the big ones, nowadays.

And he has enjoyed reveling in Gibbons' newfound cult status amongst Michigan fans. He was watching film on an airplane earlier this season, when a passenger leaned over and asked, "Hey, is that Brendan Gibbons from Michigan?"

"Yes," Zauner said. "I help him with technique."

"Can you tell him he's doing a great job?" the zealous fan asked. "I know he had a tough start, but he has been so good the last few years."

Gibbons surely has more big kicks in his future — in Michigan Stadium and beyond. But where he goes, The Crow will always be remembered from sprouting his maize-and-blue wings in Ann Arbor.

"Everybody who watches Michigan football, is a fan of Michigan football, can really appreciate what Brendan Gibbons has done for this university and all the ups and downs he's had," redshirt junior offensive tackle Taylor Lewan said. "Overall he's overcome so many things. I'm so proud of him as a friend, as a teammate. I can't say anything bad about Brendan." □