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Game Day Kaimin, October 13, 2001

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The loss of a loved one made him question his future. Now the memory pushes him to succeed.

T.J. Oelkers

Won't fade away

MONTANA VS. St. Mary's
First love

The pain of losing his high school sweetheart nearly kept T.J. Oelkers from enrolling at the University of Montana

By Chad Dundas

You just finished interviewing T.J. Oelkers and didn't go as well as you'd hoped. Everything went OK, T.J. was gracious and witty. He answered all your lame questions with a smile on his face, explained things to you when you didn't understand. Just that, something was wrong.

He'd trail off and his answers sounded clipped, abbreviated. You were doing all the talking. His eyes kept searching for something on the floor. When you switch off the tape recorder, say a few stocky ABD's, he seems surprised the interview is over. Like the whole time he hasn't been sitting here.

You're about to stand up and leave when he says he wants to talk about something else. You tell him you don't know what he means.

"The summer before I came to school here my girlfriend passed away," he says. "Her name was Darcee Zeiler, we dated for four years."

The interview begins again, but this time you hardly say a word.

T.J. starts by saying he got up early one day to mow the lawn. It was July and it was hot and he had just graduated from high school in Helena, Mont. He had a little less than a month before he would move to Missoula to walk on as a wide receiver with the Montana Grizzlies. That day he had a date with Darcee to go shopping for new glasses. T.J. admits the glasses he had were impossibly nerdy. He and Darcee were going to find new ones so he wouldn't have to go off to college with stupid glasses. When he finished with the mowing he went inside to call the Zeiler house.

"I called and her dad answered and he was just like, 'T.J., we lost her. She passed away in her sleep.' I said 'what?' I just can't even tell you what I did after that. It was just, lose it."

Darcee was home for the summer after a year at MSU-Billings. She had been battling with an eating disorder and had twice sought treatment. T.J. says that summer he felt things were finally starting to look up for her.

"She was doing as good as she had in the five years she had the disease and she was really starting to get better and really think she was starting to get out of it," he says.

"One night, her body just went crazy in my mind." He tried to think football, physically following along with the rest of the team through days of seemingly endless drills. It didn't help.

"I still put in the time and everything with football, but mentally, it just wasn't there," he says.

T.J. stuck it out, expecting he would feel better. It was a constant struggle to not pack his bags and head back to Helena that freshman year. He says he couldn't shake the feeling that he needed time away, time alone, to get his head together.

"I think my first semester here I must have called (my parents) about every other day, telling them to come pick me up. That it just wasn't worth it."

One night a particularly ugly day when he couldn't bring himself to get dressed and go to practice. He called Bill Cochill, then the wide receivers coach, to tell him he would be absent.

"I said 'I don't think I can come to practice today.' He asked me why. I said 'I don't think I can stop crying. I'm not leaving my room.' T.J. says.

"Five minutes later he was in my dorm room."

T.J. says Cochill was willing to stay as long as it took to get him feeling good enough to at least leave his dorm room and come to practice. Their conversation didn't have anything to do with football. T.J. credits the Grizzly coaching staff, under former head coach Mick Dynoesty, for their understanding and says he wouldn't have been able to stay in Missoula without their guidance.

A strong support group of friends, many of them Helena natives who also made the trek to UM, were also instrumental in the recovery process.

Whether it was friends sacrificing Saturday nights to hang out and talk to him, or pushing him to stop moping around the house, there's an impressive list of people who he'll never be able to repay for their understanding and generosity.

"My friends have been awesome," he says. "They've been so great with me. They can kind of tell when I've got it in my mind or if I'm not being normal."

Even with the help of friends and coaches, T.J. went back to Helena after his freshman year not really expecting to be back in Missoula in the fall. Things were still not right inside him. He thought he needed to take some time off from school, maybe give up football to get things in order.

In the wake of the loss, T.J. says he has the Zeiler family and Zeiler family had become one. Both families spent time at the Zeiler's lake house waterfronting or just being together.

"It's been great to have them," he says. "I think I've helped them get through it too."

At the beginning of the summer, T.J. says he started dropping hints that he was conflicted about his future. Thinly veiled references to quitting the football team caught the attention of Darcee's father, Ron, who immediately sat T.J. down for a discussion.

"I talked to her dad, and he said (Darcee) would feel bad if I gave up something I'd worked my whole life for just because of her," T.J. says.

"That was like the first day of summer that we had that talk. I think at that point I just get it in my mind that there just wasn't anything that was going to stop me from then on."

That summer, T.J. says, he worked harder than he ever had before. He ran the stairs at the high school stadium every day. He recruited Darcee's brother Darin to play catch with him for hours.

"I had Darin out there throwing me balls and he can't even throw a football," he says.

In the fall, he came back to Grizzly two-a-days buried on the depth chart with his total sharpness of mind, improved work ethic and superb conditioning impressing coaches. He moved up quickly.
Around the Sky:

Ian Costello
GameDay Kaimin

For the first time in recent memory, the Montana State Bobcats are on top of the Big Sky Conference. With wins over Weber State and Eastern Washington, the 'Cats have already doubled their conference win total from the last few years. But, really, this is classic Bobcat behavior. Outside of last year when the 'cats put forth a wireless campaign, Montana State has a history of ruining conference championship hopes for opponents when they have none of their own. Ask Cal State Northridge from two years ago, ask the University of Idaho twice in the early 1990s. Ask Portland State, who almost swept the Montana State Griz last season. And if you need any more proof, ask Eastern Washington.

But could the Bobcats have legitimate conference championship hopes? Well, the Bobcats are 2-0 in the Big Sky and, according to the pre-season polls, have already gotten past the No. 1 contender. The schedule leans in their favor. Outside of a Nov. 17 meeting with the Grizzlies, they play only one more Big Sky team with a winning conference record.

The stats may be in their favor as well. Led by return specialist Junior Adams, the 'Cats are first in the nation in punt return yardage, first in the conference in return defense efficiency, kick off coverage, and sacks and second in the conference in total defense.

And don't forget the players. Adams was selected as special teamer of the week in the Big Sky last week for his 94-yard punt return for a touchdown and totaled 116 yards returning which helped Montana State to the upset. Adams has returned three punts for scores this season. On the other side of the ball sits Ryan Johnson, who has averaged just a shade over 120 yards rushing per game, good enough for fifth in the conference.

If the 'Cats are to put together a decent season, they have to start this weekend against Sacramento State. The Hornets head to Bozeman Saturday looking to right the ship after a 42-7 loss to Montana last weekend. A good conference win streak by the kittens would at least put a little bit of excitement in their game with the Griz later this season.

GDK Prediction: 27-34 Sac State.

Portland State at Idaho State
Every time GDK sits down to research the Portland State Vikings, all we seem to find is Jimmy Blanchard this and Jimmy Blanchard that. Unfortunately for the Vikings, Jimmy Blanchard be gone— as in graduated, vamoosed, outta here. The only thing this year's Portland State team can attribute to Jimmy Blanchard is their hanging around in the national top 25. And that will be gone soon too.

Blanchard was a great quarterback, but even his memory won't save the Vikings from the downward spiral they have been in since they played Montana last season.

Trying to rebound from their 23-20 loss to Southwest Texas State last weekend, the Vikings head to hapless Idaho State Saturday night.

The Idaho State Bengals have alternated wins and losses this year, beating Montana Tech, losing to Sacramento State, beating MSU-Northern and losing to Northern Arizona. With Shegun Cummings-John, Robert Anderson-Drake, Brian Lonestar-Bingham and Northern Arizona leads the Big Sky Conference in players with hyphenated last names.

GDK Prediction: 35-6, Portland State in a breeze.

Northern Arizona vs. Weber State
Sad to say, it is tough to find a reason for GDK to care about this game. At 4-1 Northern Arizona could be one of the sleepier teams in the conference but, frankly, a game with the 1-4 Wildcats isn't much of a match up.

Northern Arizona signal caller Preston Parsons was named the conference offensive player of the week last week for 25 of 33 for 299 yards passing and three touchdowns performance against Idaho State. At one point in the game, Parsons completed 11 straight passes.

One more interesting note: With Shegun Cummings-John, Brian Lonestar-Bingham and Robert Anderson-Drake, Northern Arizona leads the Big Sky Conference in players with hyphenated last names.

GDK Prediction: 26-7 NAU.

Northern Arizona head to hapless Idaho State looking to right the ship after a 42-7 loss to Montana last weekend. Sadly, even a win against a Canadian team can't remove the bad taste still lingering from the Eagles loss to Montana State last week.

GDK Prediction: 24-20, Simon Fraser.

Eastern Washington and Portland State tie for second in that category with one each. Weber State has none.

GDK Prediction: 26-7 NAU.

Eastern Washington vs. Simon Fraser
Outside of the UM Grizzlies, the Eagles are the only Big Sky team to not play a conference opponent this week. Eastern hosts 3-2 Simon Fraser at Woodward Field on Saturday night.

After two straight losses in the conference, Eastern Washington could use a break from Big Sky opponents. Sadly, even a win against a Canadian team can't remove the bad taste still lingering from the Eagles loss to Montana State last week.

GDK Prediction: 24-20, Simon Fraser.

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Northern Arizona vs. Weber State

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Eastern Washington vs. Simon Fraser

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Etu Molden
Wide receiver
Went out two weeks ago with a bone chip in his knee. It hampered him for the first time this season. He was questionable for the homecoming game, but not today. Today, he has the happiest mugshot of his life. It's not a question of whether he's ready. It's just a question of when.

Two weeks ago: Etu saves the game for Montana in overtime vs. Eastern Washington. Last week in his hometown, he went off, grabbing seven catches for 146 yards and two touchdowns against San Jose State. For homecoming, GCK expects similar fireworks. The St. Mary's defense will likely focus on everything in the playbook at Etu but it won't matter. Molden is shaping up nicely as the Griz's new go-to receiver. It's not a question of whether he'll be ready, but when.

Defensive Linebacker
Matt Steinau
6-1, 220 senior from El Torro, Calif.
More of a "stay at home" linebacker. Steinau will be a big brick wall for the St. Mary's offense. Against Eastern Washington a few weeks ago, Steinau tallied 11 tackles, leading the team with fellow defensive endo, Vinnie Huntsberger. Irrepressible by nature impossible to scare, you might say. Anyway you want to put it, this kid is going to frighten the tar out of those Gaels. Watch one of them fools make a feeble attempt to break through the lines, 2nd on the nation for rushing or not. You try to break through the line, he break your head.

Numerical Roster

1. Lavender Sargas
2. Jonathan Talmage
3. Troy Young
4. Dave DeCoite
5. John Edwards
6. Andy Thompson
7. Brett Staninger
8. Ross Richardson
9. Joel Robinson
10. Kyler Noel
11. Adam Hoge
12. Vince Huntsberger
13. Spencer Frederick
14. Blake Horgan
15. Matt Steinau
16. James White
17. Tim Crabtree
18. Mike Mahoney
19. Ike Mincy
20. Matt Molden
21. Tyler Thomas
22. Chris Snyder
23. Dave DeCoite
24. Brad Weston
25. Jonny Varona
26. Andy Thompson
27. Ike Mincy
28. Trey Thomas
29. Mike Smith
30. Matt Stein
31. Johnnie Humphery
32. Mike Mahoney
33. Mike Mahoney
34. John Fitzgerald
35. John Fitzgerald
36. Johnathan Talmage
37. John Talmage
38. Ciche Pitcher
39. Peter Thanh
40. Mike Mahoney
41. Matt Stein
42. Blake Horgan
43. Spencer Frederick
44. John Fitzgerald
45. John Fitzgerald
46. Dan DeColle
47. Ross Richardson
48. Johnnie Humphery
49. James White
50. Derek Decker
51. Derek Decker
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53. Matt Stein
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55. Jonny Varona
56. Dan DeColle
57. Shane MacFarren
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Offense

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Wide receiver
6-2, 190 senior from Sacramento, Calif.

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The Gaels' starting lineup was named its Leading Offense for the second straight year, following 2001's victory over the Gaels' leading scorer this season and for two touchdowns. He also has 556 yards rushing.

We admit, the GDK scout team ain't what it once was and we haven't seen the kid in person, so we'll have to take Travis White. Get it? Overlook? Because he's short? Oh, nevermind.

Papanikolas has been instrumental to the Gaels as they have eased into coach Tim Landis' spread option attack over these past two seasons. Papnikolas and back Andre Coleman and Clint Wilson split the carries nearly exactly in thirds, so the Griz defense will have to key on all three to ensure Montana's fifth victory of the season.

The speedy quarterback has amassed 4,045 all-purpose yards during his career, good enough for third all-time in St. Mary's record book.

The Gaels' spread offense has been key to their success against the Griz, and we have high expectations for this season. With two touchdowns, he also has 556 yards rushing.
Scouting Report:

Bryan Haines
GameDay Kaimin

Glancing at the Top 25 this week, GameDay Kaimin noticed that the Grizzlies had a team hit on their heels. The Furman Paladins currently sit at number three, only 20 points behind Montana.

This brought up the question: What in the hell is a Paladin?

A Paladin, after looking in the dictionary, is not a penguin like one GDK member guessed, but a knight crested on top of a horse, a defender of good. A heroic mascot indeed, but a knight crested on top of a horse, a defender of good.

The reigning Walter Payton award winner, the "Ivory Tower" as he has become known to fans in Greenville, S.C., is a yardage machine.

Last season, while on his way to winning Division I-AA's player of the year award, Ivory averaged an unbelievable 7.1 yards per carry while rumbling for 2,279 yards and 18 touchdowns on 318 carries. Five times Ivory rushed for more than two hundred yards, including 301 yards and three touchdowns in a 4-2 dismantling of Georgia Southern. With stats like those, it is easy to see why we here at GDK think Ivory is the best running back in the nation not named Yohance Humphrey.

This season, teams have done all they can to hold the running back in check, and to date, Ivory has not had a break-out game. Ivory still has amassed 583 yards and seven touchdowns in five games, but he has yet to display the game-breaking abilities that make defenders lose sleep and coaches lose jobs.

When the Paladins go to the air, and with a back like Ivory that isn't often, junior Billy Napier has held his own. Napier has completed more than 61 percent of his passes, throwing for 704 yards and four touchdowns. During Furman's win over No. 6 Appalachian State last weekend, it was Napier who led the Paladins to the win, not Ivory.

With Appalachian State's performance proving that Ivory really is human by holding him to only 40 yards on 18 carries, Napier threw two second-half touchdowns of 39 and 30 yards, lifting Furman to a 28-20 win.

Little-used receiver Isaac Hayes had been invisible before last week's game as well, catching six passes for 68 yards. Hayes woke up after half-time though, catching both touchdowns on 319 carries.

Defensively, the Paladins are lose jobs. The Paladins don't put much pressure on the quarterback though, getting only 12 sacks.

The Paladins corps of receivers, like Hayes, has not seen a lot of action, making 50 catches for 767 yards and five touchdowns. Montana's pass-catching crew, meanwhile, has almost doubled that with 95 receptions for 1,201 yards and six touchdowns.

Defensively, the Paladins have been stingy, giving up only 13.8 points a game. After giving up 20 points in a season-opening loss to Division-I Wyoming, the Paladins kept opponents below 14 points in their next three cuttings.

Heading the group is All-America Bill Bouton, last year's Southern Conference Defensive player of the year. Bouton leads the Paladins with 41 tackles, six for losses.

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Grizzly wide receiver Rory Zikmund tries to hang onto a pass while Gaels have the nation's No. 2 ranked rushing offense. The Griz take on the Gaels of St. Mary's for homecoming. Western Washington's Anthony Dalton attempts to bat it away. This Gaels gust into UM with robust running game. John Peterson and the Eagles with more than 323 yards rushing per game using the same spread option offense as GSU.

Led by sophomore running back Andre Coleman, who ranks No. 21 in the nation with 494 yards in five games and averages almost seven yards per carry, the depth of the Gaels rushing attack is staggering. "It's going to be a different style of play than we've used to in the Big Sky Conference," said Griz coach Joe Glenn. Behind the 5-foot-7-inch, 175-pound Coleman, freshman fullback Clint Wilson (6-0, 215), senior quarterback Gus Papanikolas (6-1, 190) and back-up quarterback Chris Kube have totaled more than 900 yards rushing. The Gaels have scored 17 rushing touchdowns and SMC coach Tim Landis mixes it up so much that even defensive end Travis White has scored.

Of the top nine SMC rushers, only Papanikolas has an average of less than five yards per carry and two players average more than seven yards a pop. "We're going to have our hands full trying to contain these guys," Glenn said. "Coleman has explosive speed with agility and has the ability to break tackles and Papanikolas knows how to handle the ball and pose just as big of a threat." In the trenches, the Griz' defensive front matches up well against the Gaels' offensive line. The Gaels incorporate block schemes that will challenge Griz defensive coordinator Mike Breske.

"They're going to come at us low stop blocking," said Glenn. "We're not used to seeing that. We're going to have to keep our feet and stay with each man." Defensively, SMC has been consistently inconsistent regarding the schemes it runs. "Tim Landis is a crafty guy," Glenn said. "They've matched up against a pro-set offense similar to our style 12 times and have run 11 different schemes. It's tough to plan against something when you don't know what's coming."

Led by free safety Weston Borba (6-1, 195), the Gaels are flying high after a come-from-behind victory last week against University of California-Davis. Trailing 21-0 at halftime to the Division II powerhouse, the Gaels roared back scoring 21 unanswered points. The defense forced three fumbles and blocked a punt, all in the fourth quarter, to whisk the victory away. Borba had 12 tackles, forced two fumbles and recovered another to earn the I-AA Independent Defensive Player of the Week. "Anytime you're down by that much and come back, your team shows a lot of character," Glenn said.

Grizzly wide receiver Rory Zikmund tries to hang onto a pass while Gaels have the nation's No. 2 ranked rushing offense.
"Everybody handles somebody that they love dying differently. I probably took it worse than some people do."

He won a job as holder on field goals and extra points. Later he started returning punts and eventually got a chance to play wide receiver. Where once he thought of quitting, he accepted the opportunity to play with a zeal that awed even veteran coaches.

T.J. stayed on where some players who got scholarships from UM walked away. By his third year, he'd won his own scholarship.

Now a starter on a team that boasts the best I-AA receiving corps in the nation, T.J. says he's regained his faith in life. He still carries Darcee with him and he says her memory now comforts him.

"It's hard, even to this day," he says. "I mean I still have days when I wake up and want to stay in bed all day and feel sorry for myself. But time heals wounds too."

At some point — perhaps a half hour after he started talking about Darcee — you realize that this is the T.J. Oelkers you expected all along. He is laughing, talking fast, getting sidetracked on amusing anecdotes. His attention never ebbs. Your tape runs out, you flip it. He keeps going. You just try to keep up.

As an afterthought you ask him why he wanted to tell you these personal details about his life.

"I love to talk about her," he says. "It just makes me smile, even now. I don't know, maybe I thought it would be therapeutic."

You shake hands with T.J. Oelkers. You thank him and mean it. You go back to the office, rip the prepared questions out of your notebook and throw them away.