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GRIZZLY GAME DAY

Missoulian

EKLUND

LB Justin Eklund
triumphs through
tragedy, transfer

EMERGES

SHANNA MADISON, MISSOULIAN

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'I'M LIVING MY DREAM'

SHANNA MADISON, MISSOULIAN

Montana linebacker Justin Eklund (24) prays before the college football game against Northern Colorado on Oct. 3 at Washington-Grizzly Stadium in Missoula. Eklund is from Rocklin, California, and played at powerhouse Folsom High School.

FRANK GOGOLA | 406 MT Sports

Justin Eklund circled one game on the Montana schedule when he joined the football team this past offseason.

That game was the Grizzlies' trip to UC Davis in late September. The excursion to the Golden State would mark a return home for Eklund, who grew up in nearby Rocklin, California, and played for powerhouse Folsom High School.

It served as a full-circle moment for Eklund, who was back home in the midst of his breakout season in his fifth year of a college career in which he suited up for three teams, played for five head coaches and lost a close friend.

Linebacker Eklund producing at career level in final season

"It was nice to have a good extra spark to the week and having your family there, playing for people more than you," he said. "It was hands down an amazing experience. I'll remember that game forever."

Eklund tied his single-game career high with four

tackles, which he has done twice, both this year. He also recovered a fumble in the 62-22 win over UC Davis, which led to him receiving the newly introduced turnover belt.

He paraded the celebratory sideline prop over to the stands, hoisting it up in front of the roughly 30 family members, friends, and former coaches and teachers who came out to watch him. That group included his grandparents, who he was emotional to see.

"It just meant so much to have them out there," he said. "I'm just glad that afterwards they were smiling cheek to cheek, like, 'We're so proud of you.' That made my whole year so far."

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Brooks gains growing role

Transfer TE from Cal Poly gets 1st career touchdown catch

CARSON CASHION
406 MT Sports

Each week has brought a larger share of work for tight end Reese Brooks in the Montana football team's offense.

The Round Rock, Texas, native caught his first pass against Utah Tech in Week 2, totaling 7 yards. Since then, his receiving yardage totals have gone up every week. He logged 8 yards on two catches against Oregon State, including a 6-yard touchdown grab, and then accrued 21 yards on the road at UC Davis.

In his most recent showing against Northern Colorado, Brooks saw a season-high reception and yardage total, hauling in three catches for 22 yards. As the season progresses, it seems Brooks, who transferred to Montana after one season at Cal Poly, will continue to see his target share increase.

Brooks sat down with 406 MT Sports ahead of Montana's road contest against Northern Arizona at 3 p.m. MT Saturday in Flagstaff, Arizona. This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Q: How's the season been going for you so far?

A: It's been going really well. I've been growing, developing, especially in blocking. I'm glad I get to take in the culture of the new team. We're snotty players, just hitting them on the field, pancake hitting them. I love that. I absolutely love that. It's a lot different from my last school. I like it a lot more here, and it's fun getting integrated in the offense. Practices are hard, and that's what I dreamed of as a kid. Like college football, I never expected it to be easy. I expected it to be hard, grinding on my mental and physical, and I found that here.

Q: And you've been getting



SHANNA MADISON, MISSOULIAN

Montana tight end Reese Brooks (88) stands on the sideline during the college football game against Northern Colorado on Oct. 3 at Washington-Grizzly Stadium in Missoula. The sophomore caught his first career touchdown in the game against Oregon State.

some more run in the offense recently, how exciting has that been?

A: It's been absolutely exciting. You know, just coming out here every day and working hard. Here (practice field), weight room, school, on the field, like everywhere. Just being able to get into the offense, like actually get playing time, it's just very fun. I really, really enjoy it. I've just got to keep making my marks, and whenever my opportunity's given, I gotta

hit it.

Q: It kind of started with the touchdown against Oregon State, take me through that play.

A: Yeah, that was super cool. All week we were thinking about it, running it in practice, and then they called it in game. They called "14 out" and got people out of there, and I lined up. I was like, 'I don't know if it's gonna go to me or not.' It's a 50-50 chance, and I ran it, I was pretty open leading

out to my outside shoulder, and he threw it. He trusted me, and I had my opportunity, and I struck. So I'm glad I hit it.

Q: Talking about that trust, how do you feel like the connection with Keali'i (Ah Yat) has been growing throughout the year, maybe even the summer, really, and then now into the season?

A: Honestly, it's been great. Whenever I first met him, we never really talked, and then we

started talking more in the summer, getting that connection. He liked going to me, I like staying after practice, running routes with him, and then especially this semester, we have a class together or two classes together. So we've been like talking in and out of class, like actually becoming friends, not just on the field, off the field too. So I feel like that's really helped our relationship.

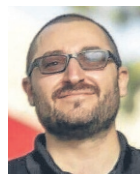
Please see **BROOKS**, Page 7

HOW WE SEE THE BIG SKY

BILL SPELTZ | 406 MT Sports

Playing Northern Arizona at Walkup Skydome in Flagstaff is no picnic.

Ask former Montana football coach Bobby Hauck. His Grizzlies suffered their only regular-season loss there in 2023 before advancing all the way to the FCS chipper.



FRANK GOGOLA

44-10



BILL SPELTZ

43-11



CARSON CASHION

41-13



VICTOR FLORES

40-14

four games (gasp) with the Fighting Illini and now he's either looking for work or has called it quits at age 62.

Perhaps this season Montana's football team will

There's the elevation (7,000 feet), the arduous travel, and the somewhat stagnant and warm indoor conditions conducive to exhaustion. Then there's the noise from the loyal Lumberjacks fans and the team's enduring belief it can do big things at home.

Two years ago, the Jacks finished with a perfect 5-0 record in their home digs and upset then-10th-ranked Sacramento State in a late September tilt. Last year, NAU beat then-19th-ranked Incarnate Word at Walkup.

The Grizzlies' loss in Flagstaff three years ago is worth revisiting because it underlines how personnel decisions can define a season. Montana's quarterback that late September day was Sam Vidlak, a capable fellow who was embroiled in a battle for the starting job with Clifton McDowell. Vidlak completed 23 of 37 passes for 210 yards and a TD in a 28-14 loss to the Jacks.

One notable stat in that game was Vidlak's 13 rushing yards. Notable because the next week he was replaced by McDowell, who was much more of a dual threat and led the Grizzlies to 10 straight wins, including memorable home overtime victories in the playoffs over Furman and North Dakota State to reach the chipper.

Things didn't turn out as Montana hoped in the championship on Jan. 7, 2024, in Frisco, Texas. I'll always maintain that if McDowell would have run the ball a few more times early in that game that things might have been different against South Dakota State. He was mighty good toting the rock.

It's all water under the bridge now. Vidlak left for Stephen F. Austin and McDowell left for McNeese State after the title game. Hauck stayed around for two more seasons at Montana, lost twice to the eventual national champion Montana State Bobcats in 2025 and then bolted for an assistant job at Illinois. He lasted just



SHANNA MADISON, MISSOULIAN

Montana defenders smother a Northern Colorado ball carrier during last Saturday's game in Missoula. The Grizzlies will play at Northern Arizona Saturday.

keep it going and eventually win an elusive national championship on the 25th anniversary of the last time they won it all under lovable coach Joe Glenn. Certainly the pieces seem to be in place for a serious run.

Here's a look at this Saturday's Big Sky games:

No. 2 Montana (3-0, 5-1) at No. 13 Northern Arizona (2-1, 4-2), 2 p.m. TV: Scripps Sports.

Both teams are sky high, riding momentum into Saturday. The Grizzlies are arguably the hottest team in the Big Sky, although their win at UC Davis doesn't look quite as impressive now after the Aggies' less-than-dominant first half against visiting Eastern Washington last week. Davis ended up beating the Eags, 49-38, but its lead was just six points at halftime, 21-15. Northern Arizona had a confidence-building win at 16th-ranked Idaho State last week. Questions linger about just how good the Grizzlies are and most of them won't be answered completely until the Brawl of the Wild in Bozeman in November. But this Saturday will provide some provocative clues. If the Grizzlies are able to light up the scoreboard on the road against Northern Arizona's solid defense, it will speak volumes. If you look at both teams and how they've fared in Big Sky competition, Montana appears to have a big edge with its offensive resume. The Griz are averaging a league-high 42 points per game and the Jacks are averaging 28.7. Still, strange things happen in domes, as MSU can attest, so Saturday could be close. **Bill Speltz:** Griz 40, Jacks 37. **Frank Gogola:** Montana 37, Northern Arizona 31. **Carson Cashion:** Montana 38, Northern Arizona 28. **Victor Flores:** Griz 35, Jacks 28.

Idaho (1-1, 1-4) at Weber State (2-1, 3-3), 1 p.m. TV:

ESPN+. The Vandals had their little 15 minutes of fame on ESPN with their controversial home win over previously undefeated Montana State last week. The second that made all the difference at the end shouldn't have

been added back to the clock after it appeared to tick away, according to former NFL ref and current rules analyst Terry McAulay. It was added and the previously winless Vandals won. What a shame. Idaho has a decent chance to win again this week over a Wildcats team that is hard to peg. Weber dropped a 44-41 home decision to lowly Portland State two weeks ago but followed up with an overtime win at Cal Poly last week. Rest assured, the Vandals are headed for a humbling loss on Oct. 17 at Washington-Grizzly Stadium. And I'll enjoy watching it as a fan of both Treasure State FCS teams. Then the Vandals' 15 minutes of fame, and their longshot playoff dreams, will be gone. **Speltz:** Wildcats 32, Vandals 30. **Gogola:** Weber State 41, Idaho 38. **Cashion:** Weber State 21, Idaho 17. **Flores:** Idaho 34, Weber 31.

Cal Poly (2-1, 3-3) at No. 16 Idaho State (1-1, 4-1), 4 p.m.

TV: ESPN+. The Bengals trailed Northern Arizona 24-7 late in the third quarter last Saturday before rallying to make things interesting. Northern Arizona ended up winning, 38-31. The fact that Idaho State has allowed an average of 31 points per game in league play, and has yet to play Montana or Montana State, is cause for concern. Cal Poly is on the rise this season, generally speaking. But losing at home to Weber State last week, 34-32 in double overtime, knocked the team down a notch. Let's just say I think the Bengals are going to outscore the Mustangs in a game that will have a lot of scoring. **Speltz:** Bengals 42, Mustangs 40. **Gogola:** Idaho State 35, Cal Poly 30. **Cashion:** Idaho State 42, Cal Poly 20. **Flores:** ISU 38, Cal Poly 28.

Northern Colorado (1-2, 2-4) at Eastern Washington

(0-3, 1-5), 5 p.m. TV: ESPN+. Is Eagles coach Aaron Best on the hot seat? If he's not, then it's a good sign Eastern Washington isn't as interested in winning football games as it used to be during the glory days not long ago. Not only do the Eags have a miserable record this season, they finished with losing records in 2022 (3-8), 2023 (4-7), 2024 (4-8) and 2025 (5-7). The good news for Eastern is that Northern Colorado is on the schedule this week. The Bears' defense was a wall of Jell-O last week at Montana. Eastern is averaging close to 31 points per game in league play and will surpass that number this week in earning its first Big Sky victory. **Speltz:** Eags 35, Bears 28. **Gogola:** Eastern Washington 28, Northern Colorado 24. **Cashion:** Eastern Washington 24, Northern Colorado 17. **Flores:** EWU 24, UNC 21.

Utah Tech (0-3, 0-6) at Portland State (1-1, 1-4), 2 p.m.

TV: ESPN+. St. George, Utah, is such a magnificent place. You'd think the Trailblazers would be able to recruit more talent just based on the fact they have palm trees in southern Utah and the hiking is out of this world at Zion National Park. On the other hand, that's probably oversimplifying things. Utah Tech is still relatively new to Division I football and it's going to take a while to put it all together. Portland State enjoyed an inspiring 44-41 win at Weber State two weeks ago, then took last weekend off. The Vikings will be rested and ready to go in Hillsboro this Saturday. **Speltz:** Viks 38, Trailblazers 28. **Gogola:** Portland State 42, Utah Tech 27. **Cashion:** Portland State 31, Utah Tech 21. **Flores:** PSU 31, Utah Tech 24.

No.	Name	Year	Pos	Ht	Wt	Hometown	18	Bryce Herges	R-Fr.	QB	5-11	200	Scottsdale, Ariz.	56	Jefferson Giles	R-Jr.	OL	6-2	290	Mesa, Ariz.
0	Khalil Bender	Fr.	WR	6-1	185	Mesa, Ariz.	18	Cameron Babineaux	R-So.	CB	6-0	175	Lancaster, Calif.	57	Carter Lavrusky	R-So.	OL	6-6	315	Scottsdale, Ariz.
0	Jackson Murray	R-Fr.	DL	6-1	285	Scottsdale, Ariz.	19	Hayden Fletcher	R-Fr.	QB	6-0	210	Peoria, Ariz.	58	Bryce Hevesy	Fr.	OL	6-4	295	Scottsdale, Ariz.
1	Shoes Brinkley	R-Sr.	S	5-9	195	Philadelphia, Pa.	20	Xavion Brazil	Fr.	CB	6-1	170	Gilbert, Ariz.	58	Matthew Orthmann	R-Jr.	DL	6-2	285	Tempe, Ariz.
1	Darius Haskin	R-So.	WR	6-0	185	Buckeye, Ariz.	21	Jaelen Collins	R-So.	CB	6-1	180	Tucson, Ariz.	59	Dallas Fineanganof	Jr.	OL	6-3	320	Elk Grove, Calif.
2	Ammon Allen	R-Sr.	LB	6-2	215	Queen Creek, Ariz.	21	Kayvion Sibley	So.	RB	5-11	185	Allen, Texas	60	John-Alexander Lopez	R-Fr.	OL	6-5	310	Phoenix, Ariz.
2	Donivan Dixon	Fr.	QB	5-8	185	Billings, Mont.	22	Bryson Torrie	R-Sr.	LB	6-0	225	Denver, Colo.	61	Elias Shamieh	R-Fr.	OL	6-4	300	San Mateo, Calif.
3	Jahaad Fort	R-Jr.	CB	5-11	180	St. Louis, Mo.	23	DeVohn Moutra Jr.	Fr.	S	5-7	180	Gardena, Calif.	64	Jace Gardner	R-Fr.	OL	6-1	270	Peoria, Ariz.
3	Joey Stout	Sr.	WR	5-9	180	Turlock, Calif.	23	Kruz Yocum	R-So.	RB	5-11	200	Kingman, Ariz.	65	Brady Bakke	R-So.	OL	6-5	310	Glendale, Ariz.
4	Michael Beresford	Jr.	CB	5-9	165	Long Beach, Calif.	24	Isaiah Sensabaugh	Fr.	S	6-0	200	Los Angeles, Calif.	69	Sione Perkins	R-Fr.	OL	6-8	315	Eagle, Idaho
4	Myseth Currie	R-Jr.	WR	6-2	205	Laveen, Ariz.	25	Jonathan Coar	So.	RB	5-10	210	Colorado Springs, Colo.	70	Travis Gutierrez	Jr.	OL	6-1	280	Phoenix, Ariz.
5	Deliyon Freeman	R-Jr.	S	5-10	180	Sharpsburg, Ga.	25	Rocky Jack	R-Jr.	DL	6-0	220	Houston, Texas	71	Camden Jury	R-So.	OL	6-6	320	Gilbert, Ariz.
5	Jaxon Williams	Jr.	WR	5-9	180	Dothan, Ala.	26	Kino Lorona	Fr.	RB	5-11	210	Winkelman, Ariz.	72	Jakob McKindley	Fr.	OL	6-3	275	Corona, Calif.
6	Ty Pennington	Sr.	QB	6-2	220	Sand Springs, Okla.	26	Christopher Williams	R-Fr.	S	5-10	190	San Juan Capistrano, Calif.	73	Isaac Adams	R-Fr.	OL	6-4	305	San Bernardino, Calif.
6	Shahid Wilson	R-Jr.	S	6-0	200	Goodyear, Ariz.	27	Nehemiah Norwood	So.	CB	6-1	180	Riverside, Calif.	74	KT Carter	R-Jr.	OL	6-4	295	Laveen, Ariz.
7	Braylon Singleton	So.	S	5-11	195	Culver City, Calif.	28	Malaki Te'o	R-Sr.	LB	6-0	225	Laie, Hawai'i	75	Corey Johnson	R-So.	OL	6-1	275	Perris, Calif.
7	Kenveon Stone	R-So.	RB	6-1	220	Kansas City, Mo.	29	Nemo Fungula	Fr.	S	6-1	195	Pleasanton, Calif.	76	Evan Haines	Fr.	OL	6-6	325	Thornton, Colo.
8	Jaiden Letua	R-Sr.	LB	6-1	240	Oceanside, Calif.	30	Kingston Filo	Fr.	LB	6-1	220	Oceanside, Calif.	80	Gabe Sema	Fr.	TE	6-2	250	Erie, Colo.
8	Joseph Ramirez	R-Fr.	WR	6-2	205	Modesto, Calif.	31	Josiah Andrews	Fr.	CB	6-0	175	Rocklin, Calif.	81	Zeb White	Fr.	WR	6-3	180	Clovis, Calif.
10	Nijrell Eason II	R-So.	CB	5-9	190	Gilbert, Ariz.	32	Jon Wilson	R-So.	RB	5-8	200	Phoenix, Ariz.	83	Braylon Gardner	R-So.	WR	6-2	205	Peoria, Ariz.
10	Quran Gossett	Jr.	RB	5-11	215	Santa Barbara, Calif.	33	Josh Hopphaus	So.	LB	5-10	205	Surprise, Ariz.	84	Luke Edgecomb	R-So.	WR	6-1	200	Houston, Texas
11	Ziggy Loa	R-Sr.	DL	6-3	235	Tacoma, Wash.	34	Cannon Garday	Fr.	LB	6-0	220	Peoria, Ariz.	85	Jaxen Robinson	R-Fr.	TE	6-5	250	Gilroy, Calif.
11	Duce Zimmerman	R-Sr.	WR	6-0	190	Anchorage, Alaska	35	Devin Murphy	R-Fr.	DL	6-2	230	Phoenix, Ariz.	86	Nathaniel Bryant	Fr.	CB	6-0	185	Tucson, Ariz.
12	Aundre Gibson	R-So.	S	5-9	185	Goodyear, Ariz.	36	Trey Smith	R-So.	CB	5-11	175	Glendale, Ariz.	87	Nassim Isaac	R-Fr.	TE	6-3	240	Phoenix, Ariz.
12	Tak Tateoka	R-Jr.	QB	6-3	215	Waukesha, Wis.	37	Tyler Manship	R-Sr.	P	6-1	180	Incline Village, Nev.	88	Elijah Banquill	R-Fr.	S	6-0	200	Scottsdale, Ariz.
13	Lindsey Graves	Fr.	RB	5-9	170	Clovis, Calif.	39	Noah Abela	Fr.	K	5-9	165	Pearland, Texas	88	JT Taylor	R-Fr.	WR	5-10	180	Jackson, Miss.
13	Jerry Johnson III	R-So.	S	6-3	195	Hollywood, Fla.	42	Jordan Lee	R-So.	LB	6-1	225	Chandler, Ariz.	89	Jeter Purdy	R-So.	TE	6-3	235	Atchison, Kan.
14	Hayden Daugherty	So.	TE	6-3	255	Gilbert, Ariz.	44	Jonas Kanyanga	Fr.	DL	6-3	250	London, England	90	Jordan Pigram	R-Jr.	DL	6-3	275	Jonesboro, Ark.
14	Dom Rausch	Sr.	DL	6-2	265	Glendora, Calif.	45	Andrew Zubey	R-So.	LS	6-2	205	Phoenix, Ariz.	91	Alani Ma'afu	5th	DL	6-2	275	Scottsdale, Ariz.
15	Nason Coleman	R-Jr.	TE	6-3	235	Chandler, Ariz.	46	Maddox Valoaga	R-Fr.	DL	6-3	250	Las Vegas, Nev.	91	Sebastian Miles	Fr.	P	5-11	185	Danville, Calif.
15	Nikhil Webb-Walker	Sr.	DL	6-6	260	Trelawny, Jamaica	47	Aidan Browder	R-Fr.	LB	6-0	195	Chandler, Ariz.	92	David Eberhard	Fr.	DL	6-5	295	Queen Creek, Ariz.
16	Peyton Stokes	R-Fr.	WR	6-4	200	Lavean, Ariz.	48	Gunnar Parra	Fr.	DL	6-4	220	Prescott, Ariz.	94	Erimi Oshewa	Jr.	DL	6-3	260	San Ramon, Calif.
16	Noble Young-Blackgoat	So.	LB	6-1	210	Flagstaff, Ariz.	49	Ryan Banse	Fr.	LS	6-1	195	Carlsbad, Calif.	96	Jayden Baer	R-Fr.	DL	6-6	265	Quartz Hill, Calif.
17	Josiah Rivera	Fr.	WR	6-2	190	Las Vegas, Nev.	52	Simi Campbell	So.	DL	6-2	290	Menifee, Calif.	98	Braeden Kaczmarek	R-Jr.	DL	6-3	295	Mesa, Ariz.
17	Myles Singleton	R-Fr.	S	5-10	175	Culver City, Calif.	52	Mattis Karrasch	R-So.	OL	6-5	305	Hamburg, Germany	99	Francisco Orduno Jr.	Fr.	K	6-2	190	Phoenix, Ariz.
18	Matthew Cooks	Sr.	LB	6-3	215	Bryan, Texas	55	Jasire Peterson	R-Jr.	DL	6-4	285	Union City, N.J.							

Eklund

From page 2

Eklund is having a season to remember. He returned from his personal homecoming to play in Montana's homecoming last week and increased his tackle total to 17 through six games, a single-season personal best for him.

He has also been a regular contributor for the Grizzlies as a linebacker whose versatility has allowed him to play multiple spots in the position group. It's the type of season he dreamed of when he set off for college in 2022.

"I'm living my dream," he said. "For a while, it was cool because I'm playing here and there, but now, to get 30, 40 snaps a game with a good brotherhood, this is what I imagined college football was, especially with this fan base here at Montana."

Eklund set the goal to be an NCAA Division I football player soon after he began playing football at 6 years old. Around fourth grade, he specialized in the sport, taking part in 7-on-7s, flag football and agility drills in the offseason.

He transferred to Folsom High School from fellow Sierra Foothill League team Rocklin as a sophomore but missed the season because of a broken wrist, Folsom head coach Paul Doherty said. Eklund didn't have a typical junior season as COVID pushed the 2020 fall season to the spring 2021.

He then played in 21 games across the spring and fall seasons from March to December 2021. He helped Folsom reach the CIF Division I-AA state championship game while leading the team in sacks.

"Incredible leadership," Doherty said. "Mature kid. Son of a coach. Son of a teacher. Only child. Really made his mind made up that football was for him. Just a versatile player, smart, intelligent and an every-down guy because he could do so much. He's physically tough, which is valuable at every level."

Eklund earned 12 offers from NCAA Division I teams during his breakout run. That included then-Pac-12 team Arizona State, Mountain West teams San Jose State, Utah State, Wyoming and Air Force, and seven Big Sky Conference teams, highlighted by Montana and Montana State.

At Folsom, he suited up with numerous players who went on to high-level college football after playing for Doherty. That included wide receiver Rico Flores (Notre Dame), tight end Walker Lyons (USC) and quarterback Austin Mack (Alabama), among a list of nearly a dozen players Doherty highlighted.

"There's always so much pressure, so



SHANNA MADISON, MISSOULIAN

Montana linebacker Justin Eklund (24) lines up for a play during the college football game against Northern Colorado on Oct. 3 at Washington-Grizzly Stadium in Missoula. Eklund has totaled a career-high 17 tackles this season.

much high expectations, especially in high school," he said after watching Eklund play in the game at UC Davis. "At Folsom, we can't lose a game ever, can't throw an interception ever. These are just kids. We went through it last year where five-star Ryder Lyons (now at BYU) got murdered in the press or on social media if he had an incompleteness."

"Our kids are always in such high-stress, high-pressure environments in high school and college. To watch them play football and enjoy it and see their work come to fruition, to watch him run around free and be with his teammates and be excited out there, it was just cool, it was rewarding."

Eklund began living out his dream in 2022 not far from his hometown at San Jose State, an FBS team. So too was Camdan McWright, one of his roommates who he quickly formed a tight bond with while admiring McWright's devotion to his faith during their freshman season.

McWright was a standout running back from Southern California who played as a true freshman, making his debut on Oct.

7, 2022. Fourteen days later, he died when a school bus hit him while he was riding an electric scooter.

The loss hit Eklund hard mentally. He remained in San Jose for the time being, playing in three games as a freshman and a sophomore. When head coach Brent Brennan left for Arizona after the 2023 season, Eklund left too.

"I'm like, dude, I just want a fresh start," he said. "That felt like I can take a deep breath in and breathe again and really be like, OK, now I'm here to play football. I'm not here to figure out life. You're kind of doing that going through college, but I just wanted to play football. I came way better out of it."

He made the journey to Bowling Green, an Ohio-based team in the FBS Mid-American Conference. While random at first glance, he went there to play for outside linebackers coach Sammy Lawanson, who had known him since Eklund was a kid and tried to recruit him to Northern Arizona out of high school.

Staff turnover after one season left Eklund with a new head coach, defensive coordinator and linebackers coach following his most productive season up to that point. His playing time dropped off in 2025 and he entered the portal.

His D-coordinator, Brandon Fisher, a former Griz linebacker, put in a good word for him at UM, he said. It helped that UM's linebackers coach at the time was Roger Cooper, who tried to recruit Eklund to Idaho State out of high school.

"Something I have learned is just being super positive no matter what happens," he said. "Every day in my notebook, for as long as I can remember, I just write, 'Go 1-0 today.' Screw everything in the past, screw everything that happened an hour ago. You can't worry about anything in the future."

Eklund was ready to roll when he arrived at Montana, eager to make his final season a memorable one. Then the Griz went through a head coaching change in early February. He embraced a hope that things would still work out.

He knew it would when he heard UM hired Eric Sanders as the defensive coordinator and linebackers coach. Sanders had begun recruiting Eklund to Stanford out of high school before the Cardinal got a different commitment.

In Sanders' defense, Eklund has played the outside linebacker spots and the hybrid linebacker/defensive end role as he has split time in linebacker and D-line meetings because of his flexibility. He even has the understanding and capability to line up at middle linebacker if needed, Sanders said.

"He's the type of high IQ, tough football player that we want," Sanders said. "We want to build this program around defense. Guys like him that are smart, tough, they are perfect."

Moving positions isn't new to Eklund. He has played every linebacker spot as well as D-end and nickel in 3-4, 4-3 and 4-2-5 defenses since high school while ranging in weight from 215 to 240 pounds to fill the role he was in.

The football IQ part took him some time to master. It wasn't until 2024 at Bowling Green that he felt things began to truly click. When he came to Montana, some terminology was different, but it was his first spring camp where he felt he could focus more on the physical aspect of playing football.

Being quizzed by his father, a former high school football coach, to draw up plays on a whiteboard via FaceTime helped him along throughout college. It was a learning approach that he had done with coaches growing up.

"My goal was to always not just be the fastest person to put it out but also to be correct," he said. "Even now, we get football tests every week, and me and Peyton Wing are always like, 'Oh, what did you get? You got 9 out of 10. I got 10 out of 10.' It's that knack of the football IQ helps me elevate my game."

When Eklund took the field for that game he circled against UC Davis, he made sure to circle the 6-yard line. Once there, he said a prayer for McWright, his late teammate who wore jersey No. 6, which he tattooed on his left wrist.

It's been a tradition every game, home or away, since his freshman season, including in his games at Wa-Griz this year. That wouldn't be a routine had he chose to attend UM coming out of high school when he was first recruited.

In the days after the UC Davis game, a small part of him wondered what if he had made that choice. The thought quickly disappeared. He has no regrets.

"I truly believe through thick and thin God puts you through trials and tribulations for a reason," he said. "If it wasn't for me going through what I went through at San Jose with my friend passing, if it wasn't for transferring across the country to Ohio, if it wasn't for playing in different defenses, that wouldn't put me in the best position for what I'm doing now."

"I'm always trying to be where my own two feet are."

Frank Gogola is the Senior Sports Reporter at the Missoulian and 406 MT Sports. Follow him on X @FrankGogola or email him at frank.gogola@406mtsports.com.

Brooks

From page 3

Q: What classes are they?

A: It's a bio lab, and we have an actual bio class with like a lot of people. But yeah, our bio lab is super fun. There's some other football players too in there. We all work together, make sure everyone's getting their work done.

Q: What do you remember from the Cal Poly game in Missoula last year?

A: I didn't travel that game, but I do remember watching on the TV. I was like, 'Holy crap, the stadium's huge.' That was the first thing. Whenever I saw all of them come out of the tunnels, that's stadium pulse for real. Whenever I was like in the stadium at Cal Poly, it was super cool. Both sides were kind of up on hills, it was pretty fun. And then I saw that game, and I was like, 'Wow, like that's the college football experience for real.' You're surrounded all around, filling both sides. You can hear the crowd on the TV, and that's how you know it's loud.

Q: When you got here, what stood out as some of the differences between the football programs?

A: I would say again, just the standard. Things can slide at Cal Poly, like maybe being a little late or not really giving an effort. Here, if you're not giving effort, you're getting screamed at, you're getting punished immediately. Coach (Brent) Pease is always on it. I absolutely love coach Pease because that's the coach that you need.

Q: What's stood out about Montana and Missoula since your arrival?

A: For sure the mountains. As a Texan, someone that comes from Austin,

Texas, super flat. You don't see this. Whenever I first got to Cal Poly, actually, I was like dang, because Cal Poly is right on the bottom of a hill, and I was like, 'Dang, we're right next to a mountain, it's pretty crazy, that's wild.' And then I got here. As soon as I got off the flight, I was driving from the airport. The mountain (Blue Mountain), I was like, 'Yo, that's actually a real mountain.' It was in the wintertime, so it's like snowy, and I was like, this is super cool. I never got to see any snow too before. I got to see snow a couple times here at Missoula, so I absolutely love that. It was super fun, and then the people all too. Everyone was super nice, everyone was super integrated into Griz sports too.

Q: What are some of your hobbies?

A: I would definitely say, obviously as a teenage guy, playing video games. I love video games. I play Rocket League a lot. I'm ranked GC1. I was even talking to the e-sports team because they want people to try out. I'll probably do that in off season. I also like to make music. I like to make house music and electronic music and stuff like that, something I do in my free time.

Q: Is there any significance to your number, 88?

A: To be honest, not really. I never really had sig-

Montana's Reese Brooks runs onto the field against Northern Colorado on Oct. 3 at Washington-Grizzly Stadium in Missoula. The native of Round Rock, Texas, transferred to the Grizzlies from Cal Poly this past offseason.

SHANNA MADISON, MISSOULIAN



nificance to 88. I do like to fall in line with it because of the receivers, like Dez Bryant. I kind of like leaning towards a receiving tight end, but no, not really. I just got to Cal Poly and they were like, 'What number do you want to be?' And I was like, 'I don't really care. Give me a number.' Right. And they were like, 'We think 88 is gonna look good on you because you look like a receiving tight end.' So I was like, 'All right.' So I stuck with it.

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