

GRIZZLY GAME DAY

Missoulian

BRANDON CASEY THRIVES
WITH DETERMINATION,
DEDICATION TO MONTANA

COMMITTED CASEY



ANTONIO IBARRA OLIVARES. MISSOULIAN

ROSTERS, PAGE 2 • Q&A WITH WR XAVIER HARRIS, PAGE 4 • SPELTZ PICKS THE BIG SKY, PAGE 5



Your hometown,
bear-aware hauler

Visit RepublicServices.com to learn more



REPUBLIC
SERVICES

Sustainability in Action

MONTANA ROSTER

No.	Name	Year	Pos.	Hgt.	Wt.	Hometown	Retired in Honor of Terry Dillon													
0	Monte Gillman	Fr.	ATH	5-8	153	Dassel, Minn.	22	Beau Dantic	R-So.	RB	5-9	192	Laurel, Mont.	59	Hayden Opitz	R-Fr.	LB	6-2	224	Helena, Mont.
0	Vai Kaho	R-Sr.	LB	6-1	235	Reno, Nev.	23	Cameron Gurnsey	R-Fr.	WR	6-0	181	Butte, Mont.	60	Dillon Botner	R-Sr.	OL	6-6	290	Whitefish, Mont.
2	Drew Deck	R-Jr.	WR	5-9	160	Kalispell, Mont.	24	Jaxon Lee	Sr.	S	6-1	210	Missoula, Mont.	62	Everett Johnson	R-Jr.	OL	6-7	301	Turlock, Calif.
2	Ronald Jackson Jr.	R-Jr.	CB	6-1	191	Detroit, Mich.	25	Nick Ostmo	Gr.	RB	6-0	221	Portland, Ore.	63	Dylan Cohen	R-Fr.	OL	6-1	267	Seattle, Wash.
3	Brooks Davis	Fr.	WR	6-0	168	Brentwood, Calif.	26	Jordan Dever	R-Fr.	WR	6-0	170	Spokane, Wash.	64	Matt Hilden	Fr.	OL	6-6	278	Santa Rosa, Calif.
4	Dane Parker	Fr.	S	6-1	178	Puyallup, Wash.	27	Isiah Childs	Sr.	LB	6-1	209	Manhattan, Kan.	66	Brandon Casey	Sr.	OL	6-5	309	Sandpoint, Idaho
4	Ryan Simpson	R-Sr.	WR	6-6	209	Bozeman, Mont.	28	Tanner Huff	R-Jr.	CB	6-0	207	Butte, Mont.	68	Torin Jeske	Fr.	OL	6-6	253	Bozeman, Mont.
5	Junior Bergen	Sr.	WR	5-11	184	Billings, Mont.	29	Kade Cutler	R-So.	S	6-0	203	Phillipsburg, Mont.	69	Noah Kaschmitter	R-Jr.	DL	6-3	253	Grangeville, Idaho
6	Prince Ford	R-Jr.	CB	5-11	170	Concord, N.C.	30	Tommy Running Rabbit	Fr.	ATH	6-1	202	Browning, Mont.	69	Cannon Panfiloff	R-Jr.	OL	6-6	293	Roy, Utah
6	Keelan White	R-Sr.	WR	6-2	184	North Vancouver, B.C.	31	Geno Leonard	R-Jr.	LB	5-11	231	Missoula, Mont.	70	Colin Amick	Fr.	OT	6-6	264	Sammamish, Wash.
7	Malae Fonoti	Fr.	RB	5-11	200	Palolo Valley, Hawaii	32	Tyson Rostad	R-So.	S	6-1	201	Hamilton, Mont.	72	Cade Klimczak	Sr.	OL	6-1	286	Rockford, Mich.
7	Kash Goicoechea	Fr.	S	6-1	194	Kalispell, Mont.	33	Lekeldrick Bridges	Fr.	WR	5-11	162	Cedar Hill, Texas	73	Trevor Steinbach	Fr.	OL	6-5	290	Sammamish, Wash.
8	Keali'i Ah Yat	R-Fr.	QB	6-1	192	Kaneohe, Hawaii	34	Talen Reynolds	Fr.	RB	5-11	161	Missoula, Mont.	74	Tate Templeton	R-Fr.	OL	6-3	298	Missoula, Mont.
8	Kenzel Lawler	R-Jr.	CB	6-0	190	Corona, Calif.	35	Grady Walker	Fr.	ATH	6-4	202	Missoula, Mont.	75	Declan McCabe	R-Jr.	OL	6-4	295	Waco, Texas
9	Chrishawn Gordon	R-Sr.	S	5-11	191	Oceanside, Calif.	36	Ty Morrison	Jr.	KP	6-3	210	Valencia, Calif.	76	Journey Grimsrud	R-Jr.	OL	6-3	302	Huntley, Mont.
9	Sawyer Racanelli	R-Sr.	WR	6-3	208	Brush Prairie, Wash.	36	Garrett Speer	Fr.	DB	6-0	187	Portland, Ore.	77	Michael Ray	R-So.	OL	6-3	289	Yakima, Wash.
10	Eli Gillman	R-So.	RB	6-0	208	Dassel, Minn.	37	Trevin Gradney	R-Sr.	CB	6-0	184	Billings, Mont.	78	Lucas Freitas	R-Fr.	OL	6-6	312	Snoqualmie, Wash.
10	TJ Rausch	R-Jr.	S	6-3	205	Missoula, Mont.	38	Marcus Evans	R-So.	LB	6-0	221	Helena, Mont.	79	Liam Brown	R-Jr.	OL	6-5	317	Beaverton, Ore.
11	Cole Grossman	R-Sr.	TE	6-4	220	Vancouver, Wash.	39	Jace Kluczewich	R-Jr.	S	5-10	166	Frenchtown, Mont.	80	Brady Lang	R-Jr.	WR	6-1	179	Bozeman, Mont.
11	Gabe Longin	R-Jr.	S	5-11	184	Great Falls, Mont.	40	Cooper Barnum	Sr.	LB	6-2	225	Vancouver, Wash.	81	Joseph Grezszak	R-So.	TE	6-5	241	Pilot Mountain, N.C.
12	Elijah Brady	R-Fr.	CB	6-1	165	Seattle, Wash.	41	Brayton Boyer	R-Fr.	KP	5-11	179	Madison, N.J.	82	Ian Finch	R-So.	WR	6-3	204	Missoula, Mont.
12	Logan Fife	R-Jr.	QB	6-0	205	Tracy, Calif.	42	Riley Wilson	R-Jr.	LB	6-2	230	Prosper, Texas	83	Drew Klumph	R-So.	WR	5-11	181	Missoula, Mont.
13	Xavier Harris	Sr.	RB	5-10	173	Oxnard, Calif.	43	Grayson Pibal	R-Jr.	LS	6-3	197	Clackamas, Ore.	84	Evan Shafer	Sr.	TE	6-5	273	Connersville, Ind.
13	Ryder Meyer	R-Sr.	S	5-10	185	Fairfield, Mont.	44	Ryan Tirrell	R-Sr.	LB	6-2	235	Missoula, Mont.	85	Dayton Toney	R-Jr.	WR	6-1	191	Frisco, Texas
14	Aaron Fontes	Sr.	WR	6-1	170	Oxnard, Calif.	45	Caleb Otlewski	R-Fr.	LB	6-4	235	Melissa, Texas	86	Joe Weida	R-So.	TE	6-4	230	Missoula, Mont.
14	Kyon Loud	Fr.	CB	6-2	172	San Mateo, Calif.	46	Jo Silver	Jr.	KP	6-0	203	Fremont, Ohio	87	Jake Olson	R-Jr.	TE	6-7	258	Butte, Mont.
15	Retired in Honor of Dave Dickenson						47	Kellen Detrick	R-Jr.	DL	6-3	235	Havre, Mont.	88	Erik Barker	Sr.	TE	6-4	240	Keizer, Ore.
16	Kaden Huot	R-So.	QB	6-4	210	Helena, Mont.	48	Hayden Harris	R-Sr.	DE	6-5	255	Mill Creek, Wash.	89	Danny Sirmon	Fr.	TE	6-6	240	Missoula, Mont.
16	Owen Reynolds	Fr.	S	6-0	182	Red Lodge, Mont.	49	Isaac Keim	Fr.	TE	6-4	260	Kalispell, Mont.	90	Jareb Ramos	R-So.	DL	6-4	285	Centennial, Colo.
17	Kade Boyd	R-Fr.	S	6-0	193	Billings, Mont.	50	Erich Osteen	R-Sr.	LB	6-2	216	Simi Valley, Calif.	91	Jaxon Tucker	Fr.	DL	6-3	232	Billings, Mont.
17	Luke Flowers	Fr.	QB	6-1	187	Rigby, Idaho	51	Austin Buehler	R-Fr.	OL	6-5	270	Helena, Mont.	92	RB Wilson V	Jr.	DL	6-4	241	Henderson, Nev.
18	Sam Alford	R-So.	WR	6-3	186	Park City, Utah	52	Cy Stevenson	R-Fr.	LB	6-2	222	Libby, Mont.	93	Sloan McPherson	R-Jr.	DL	6-4	250	Savage, Mont.
18	Chase McGurran	R-So.	S	6-0	196	Helena, Mont.	53	Braunson Henriksen	R-So.	OL	6-5	280	Polson, Mont.	94	Brendan Murphy	R-Fr.	DL	6-2	228	Seattle, Wash.
18	Cody Schweikert	Fr.	ATH	6-3	208	Columbia Falls, Mont.	54	Cooper Walton	R-So.	LB	6-1	230	Johnstown, Colo.	95	Dylan Smith	R-Jr.	DL	6-4	248	Whitehall, Mont.
19	Padraig Lang	R-Jr.	S	6-1	189	Bozeman, Mont.	55	Andres Lehrmann	R-Sr.	DE	6-2	246	Doral, Fla.	96	Henry Nuce	R-Jr.	DL	6-4	253	Kalispell, Mont.
19	Gage Sliter	R-Fr.	QB	6-1	189	Kalispell, Mont.	56	Garrett Hustedt	R-Sr.	LB	6-2	235	Omaha, Neb.	97	Grant Glasgow	R-So.	KP	6-1	194	Lawrence, Kan.
20	BJ Phillips	R-Jr.	WR	5-9	150	San Antonio, Texas	57	Jake Mason	R-Fr.	DL	6-2	256	Ferndale, Wash.	97	Tyson Simmons	Fr.	DE	6-3	252	Chandler, Ariz.
21	Stevie Rocker Jr.	R-Jr.	RB	6-0	214	Tucson, Ariz.	58	Clay Oven	R-Fr.	LB	6-2	211	Billings, Mont.	98	Matai Mata'afa	R-Jr.	DL	6-1	231	Lahaina, Hawaii
													99	Pat Hayden	R-Sr.	DT	6-2	285	Deptford, N.J.	

MOREHEAD STATE ROSTER

No.	Name	Year	Pos.	Hgt.	Wt.	Hometown														
0	Bronson England	Jr.	WR	6-0	180	Modesto, Calif.	25	Chad Atkins	Fr.	WR	6-4	175	Bellvue, Ky.	58	Noah Benza	Sr.	DL	6-4	255	Hebron, Ky.
0	Jalen Henderson	Jr.	DB	6-0	180	Richmond, Calif.	25	Wesley Rees	Jr.	DB	6-4	195	Carmel, Calif.	59	Tyler Rice	R-Sr.	DL	6-3	250	Brooksville, Ky.
1	Chance Harris	Sr.	RB	6-0	185	North Tazewell, Va.	26	Luke Bauer	R-Jr.	LB	6-0	235	Akron, Ohio	60	Zach Fish	R-Jr.	OL	6-4	280	Fresno, Calif.
2	Nate Boehm	R-So.	WR	6-0	190	Warner Robins, Ga.	27	Grant Goodman	R-Fr.	RB	6-0	185	Louisville, Ky.	62	Jacob Ziegler	Fr.	OL	6-4	285	Sandusky, Ohio
2	Zane Porter	R-Jr.	LB	6-3	210	Ceredo, W.Va.	28	Jackson Lanier	Jr.	RB	5-8	175	Bluffton, S.C.	64	Gabe Kays	Fr.	OL	6-4	270	Louisville, Ky.
3	Drew Nyangweso	Jr.	DB	6-1	185	Tacoma, Wash.	29	Daniel Burke	Jr.	K	6-2	180	Yokosuka, Japan	64	Khader Yasin	Jr.	OL	5-11	295	Hollister, Calif.
3	Caleb Tillman	Sr.	WR	6-3	200	Birmingham, Ala.	30	Chris Johnson	Fr.	LB	6-2	205	Richmond, Va.	65	Colton Carmichael	R-So.	OL/LS	6-2	250	Richfield, Ohio
4	David Parsons	Fr.	QB	6-3	225	Parkersburg, W.Va.	31	Jackson Benjamin	Sr.	DB	6-1	185	Los Gatos, Calif.	69	Adrian Lopez	Fr.	OL	6-3	290	Plano, Texas
5	Dylan Cook	Sr.	DB	6-2	205	Tucson, Ariz.	32	Tyler Cordero	R-Fr.	WR	6-0	185	Boca Raton, Fla.	70	JT Self	R-So.	OL	6-3	270	Crestwood, Ky.
5	Trevon Kleint	Sr.	WR	6-0	190	Broken Arrow, Okla.	32	Trevion Green	Gr.	WR	6-0	190	Miami, Fla.	71	Torbyn Eakins	R-Sr.	OL	6-5	315	New Oxford, Pa.
6	Andre Nolan-White	R-Jr.	LB	6-2	230	Rocklin, Calif.	33	Alex Herrera	R-So.	DB	5-10	185	San Jacinto, Calif.	72	Terry Hou	Fr.	OL	6-4	280	San Diego, Calif.
7	James Louis	Sr.	RB	5-8	195	Hillside, N.J.	33	Noah Skobis	R-Sr.	DB	5-9	175	Downey, Calif.	76	Xavier Orta	R-Jr.	OL	6-3	305	Dallas, Texas
7	Kylyn Macklin	Jr.	DL	6-3	255	Cincinnati, Ohio	34	Josh Bowling	R-Fr.	LB	6-2	230	Independence, Ky.	77	Drew Dickerson	R-Fr.	OL	6-5	310	Union, Ky.
8	Matthew McClelland	R-So.	DB	6-2	200	Mesa, Ariz.	35	Brittyn Eakins	R-Fr.	RB	6-0	205	New Oxford, Pa.	80	Christian Pedersen	R-So.	TE	6-5	235	Burlingame, Calif.
9	Carter Cravens	R-Jr.	QB	6-2	205	Cypress, Texas	35	Sydney Webb	Fr.	DB	5-10	165	Roanoke, Va.	81	Nate Garnett	So.	WR	5-11	160	Auburndale, Fla.
9	Jihad McCall	R-Jr.	DB	6-1	200	Jersey City, N.J.	36	Damion Thompson	Jr.	DB	6-0	158	Pasadena, Calif.	82	Harrison Cohen	R-Sr.	TE	6-2	225	Fort Mill, S.C.
10	Damin Green	Fr.	WR	5-10	190	Lexington, Ky.	37	Thomas Schwartz V	R-So.	K	6-1	175	Treynor, Iowa	83	Anthony Ice	Fr.	WR	5-10	170	Parkersburg, W.Va.
11	Connor Genal	Gr.	QB	6-5	215	Lake Forest, Calif.	38	Kenneth Shaffner	R-So.	LB	6-1	240	Louisville, Ky.	84	Kyle Koch	Fr.	WR	6-2	180	Lebanon, Ohio
11	Benjamin Haywood III	Sr.	DB	6-2	195	Ft. Myers, Fla.	40	VJ Anthony	R-Jr.	TE	6-3	235	Louisville, Ky.	85	Bradley West	R-Jr.	WR	5-9	175	Louisville, Ky.
13	Ryan Upp	Sr.	WR	5-10	180	Leesburg, Va.	41	Kairo Reid	R-Sr.	LB	6-1	225	Antioch, Calif.	86	Leo Maranghi	Jr.	WR	6-3	210	San Francisco, Calif.
14	Isaiah Watts	Fr.	DB	5-11	165	Lexington, Ky.	42	Dillon Schobourgh	Jr.	LB	6-0	225	Toronto, Ont., Canada	87	Brody Perkins	R-Fr.	TE	6-3	230	Burnside, Ky.
15	Ben Hanson	R-Fr.	QB	6-4	220	Verona, Wis.	43	Cameron Love	Fr.	WR	6-4	210	Fairfax, Va.	88	Shyhiem Drew	R-So.	WR	6-5	215	Lexington, Ky.
16	Cameron Brown	Jr.	WR	6-0	190	Fresno, Calif.	44	Ryan Sissel	R-Fr.	LB	6-1	220	Portsmouth, Ohio	89	Stephen Wyviorka	Fr.	DL	6-4	235	Ashburn, Va.
17	Bryce Patterson	R-So.	QB	6-3	215	Versailles, Ky.	45	Daniel Faccone	R-Jr.	TE	6-1	225	Crystal Lake, Ill.	90	Jake Rhodes	R-Fr.	DL	6-2	265	Cincinnati, Ohio
18	Jaxson Chrest	R-Jr.	WR	6-0	185	Cypress, Texas	46	Bennett Hobbs	Fr.	DB	6-1	180	Brandenburg, Ky.	91	Gabe Whittington	So.	DL			

Casey completes commitment

Idaho native relies on childhood lessons to fulfill potential at UM

FRANK GOGOLA
406 MT Sports

Brandon Casey learned an important lesson as a tall, skinny youngster playing defense and midfield on the soccer pitch.

He couldn't quit something just because it was hard or wasn't fun. That was the mandate from his parents, and it applied to soccer in this case.

"I hated it. I hated every second of it," Casey, now a senior at Montana, recalled ahead of the Grizzlies' game against Morehead State at 1 p.m. on Saturday in Washington-Grizzly Stadium.

"There was a lot of long nights where I'd come home from soccer practice and would be pretty frustrated and my parents would sit me down and be like, 'Look, you started it, you wanted to sign up for it at the beginning of the year, it's important that you finish it through,' so I finished it through."

His mother, Anne Marie Casey, finally let him trade in his soccer cleats for football ones in sixth grade. He's had a love affair with football through the ups and downs for the 12 years since then.

He became an All-Big Sky first-team offensive lineman last year, making him the first high school recruit that the Griz have developed into that caliber of player since Bobby Hauck took over as head coach in 2018. He's just the second Griz O-lineman in that stretch to earn first-team honors.

Casey developed the credentials to try his hand at the FBS level if he chose. That has been a somewhat regular occurrence among top-tier offensive linemen in the Big Sky since the advent of the transfer portal.

Yet he didn't consider transferring. His loyalty to Montana is thick. Plus, with the impact his mother and father, Bart Casey,



ANTONIO IBARRA OLIVARES, MISSOULIAN

Montana offensive lineman Brandon Casey (66) warms up before the Grizzlies' spring football game on April 12 at Washington-Grizzly Stadium in Missoula. Casey has started in 32 games at UM, the most of any player on the roster.

made and the support they still provide, it was important he was close to home so they could attend games.

"The biggest thing for me is fulfilling whatever I start," he said. "My dad instilled in me early that whatever we start in our family we finish and we see it through. That was a big factor in my decision to stay. I love the people here. They've all been great to me. I've had a fantastic experience. I want to finish it out for myself and the team."

Casey's commitment to the Griz was challenged before he even made it to campus for his first fall camp. He had committed to Montana on a full-ride scholarship in August 2019 leading up to his senior year of high school.

Just weeks before signing day in December, Oregon State put on a recruiting blitz with its own full-ride offer for him to play in the

Pac-12. The Beavers were trying to get him to flip his commitment, but Casey came up with a pancake block against those efforts, keeping his word with Montana.

He said he hasn't had any second thoughts since making that decision.

"Absolutely not," he said. "I've never had regrets about it. If I went through the process again, I'd pick Montana every time. I love it here. I have a lot of pride in Montana. I have no regrets at all."

It was a rarity for a player to be offered by a Pac-12 program in Sandpoint, a town in northern Idaho with a population of just under 10,000 people. Casey was one of those athletes to merit that level of attention, being the lone NCAA Division I football scholarship player from the program in the past decade.

He credited George Yarno Jr., his offensive line coach at Sand-

point High School, with teaching him how to play on the O-line. He had played wide receiver and linebacker on junior varsity football at 6-foot-4 and 160 pounds. He was an all-around athlete who did basketball, baseball, lacrosse and track.

Yarno, who played D-I football and is the son of a former college and NFL coach, believes Casey has what it takes to play in the Football Bowl Subdivision and in the NFL. He brought up the question this past offseason if Casey was thinking about transferring up for his final year of eligibility.

They had also talked when Casey was debating between UM and Oregon State back in 2019. Yarno shared his story of choosing FBS Nevada, being buried on the depth chart and transferring to Big Sky program Idaho State, where he got to play quicker and earned All-America honors as a

center in 2006.

"He was always first one there, last one to leave," Yarno recalled of Casey. "I don't think I remember him ever missing a single day in the voluntary summer workouts that we ever do. Always asking what extra work he could get, if I could stay after and help with this or that or he was struggling on something at practice, 'Hey, coach, can we stay after and work on it?'"

"You want to talk commitment, he was a very special kid. You don't get to coach kids like that very often with that level of commitment and that level of ability. Usually you have one or the other."

Casey — who grew up as a fan of the Idaho Vandals, the school where his parents met and his uncle David Parker played football — got thrown into the fire early on at UM. He started twice and played in six games at right tackle in 2021 as a freshman after his 2020 season was canceled by the pandemic.

Former Griz offensive linemen Dylan Cook, who is now in his third year in the NFL, and Conlan Beaver were two guys who took Casey under their wings and mentored him. He credited those guys and former Montana offensive line coach Chad Germer with instilling confidence in him early on.

Germer, an All-America center at UM in 1991, had coached Casey from 2020 through the 2023 season with the Griz. He saw first hand how Casey was an attentive learner in position group meetings, did extra film study on his own and put in time in the weight room to get up to 309 pounds in his 6-5 frame.

"He's kind of a prototype developmental O-lineman," Germer said. "Big kid that was a multi-sport athlete. Broad shoulders and was going to be a big kid. That time he was spending in the weight room and cafeteria, it wasn't a surprise that he grew

Harris is X-Factor for offense

Senior WR makes instant impact after three seasons at RB

FRANK GOGOLA
406 MT Sports

Xavier Harris has been a revelation at receiver in his first two games playing the position for the Montana Grizzlies.

The senior posted a career-high 69 receiving yards and his second career touchdown catch, a 34-yarder on fourth down, in the 29-24 win over Missouri State. He followed with five catches for 56 yards, both game highs, and another touchdown in a 27-24 loss at North Dakota in Week 2.

Harris is up to 376 yards and three touchdowns on 44 receptions in his career. His nine catches for 128 yards and two scores this year are all team highs. He has played the majority of his 41 games at running back before moving in the offseason. He's run for 1,329 yards and nine scores on 274 carries.

Harris has also taken on a larger special teams role this year as he looks to show his playmaking ability in the open field. He has six kick returns for 126 yards this season after previously returning only one kick, back in 2022.

"X is a versatile guy," Montana head coach Bobby Hauck said. "He can play running back and wide receiver. It's been great to have a guy like that. He can go in the backfield and carry the ball or he can get out and do the things on the perimeter. He's worked hard at his blocking. He's been playing in the kicking game.

"Just a versatile player like X is always good to have. And then on a personal note he's a pretty dang good guy to be around every day. He's enjoyable."

Harris sat down with 406 MT Sports prior to the Grizzlies' game against Morehead State at 1 p.m. on Saturday at Washington-Grizzly Stadium. This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Q: Can you walk me through

your touchdown catch against Missouri State and what you were seeing as the play was developing?

A: "At the beginning of that drive, we did the same formation and they only had two people out there. When we decided to do it again and there was only one person, we knew what was going to happen. I seen that and I just had a feeling. I knew I could trust Keelan (White) and Sawyer (Racaneli) to block whoever is front of me. All I had to do was make sure I catch the ball and I'll handle the rest. I tell them that all the time: Just get your hands on the guys and I'll put it in the end zone."

Q: How did it feel to score a touchdown again and to do it in a big-time moment?

A: "It felt good. The only thing about it is I wish it was in the student section. That's the only corner of the end zone I haven't scored in yet. I've scored in both corners of the north end zone and one corner on the south end zone."

Q: Your first catch of the game was an impressive one at the 4-yard line, high-pointing the ball with a defender on you. Did you know you had that in you?

A: "I did know I had that in me. It's always about just trusting your hands and watching it go into your hands. At the same time, I was watching the top NFL catches before the game. So I feel like that had a lot of influence on me too. I just feel like I got good enough hands to make a catch no matter whose hands are in traffic."

Q: Before that, the first three passes thrown to you were incompletions, but you caught the next three you saw, so how were you able to stay in it mentally so you were ready when another chance came your way?

A: "It's kind of like shooting a basketball. I'd rather go 0 for 82 than 0 for 3 because that just means you stopped trying. Just because I got incomplete passes three times in a row, I'm going to keep trying to



SHANNA MADISON, MISSOULIAN

Montana senior Xavier Harris catches the ball during the college football game between the Montana Grizzlies and the Missouri State Bears on Aug. 31 at Washington-Grizzly Stadium in Missoula. Harris has made an instant impact in his first season playing wide receiver after previously being a running back.

get open for my quarterback?"

Q: How did the idea of you playing receiver come about in the spring and what was your reaction to it?

A: "It was rough. I kind of wanted to go back there a year ago. I wanted to move to receiver because I felt like Eli (Gillman) and Nick (Ostmo) can handle their own. I feel like it was a solid run group. Just because I'm at the receiver position, I can still be in the

backfield at the same time in case they need it. So I just wanted to help anywhere I could.

"When they told me they're moving me to receiver, I just felt like it's a new opportunity to go make something shake and put my name out there again. I was waiting and I got my chance and I'm going to make the most of it."

Q: How much receiver had you played in the past before college?

A: "I've been bouncing around from running back and receiver throughout youth ball and high school. I made all-stars as a receiver at the age of 11. Then in high school I was bouncing around. They'd have packages where I'm at slot. My sophomore year I actually started at slot, which was interesting. After that, I've just been transferring back and forth. It was really nothing new. I just had to get back into the lab and get back into the receiving mindset."

Q: How did that process go moving to receiver and what were the biggest things to learn or relearn?

A: "Open-field releases. Open-field releases. Open-field releases. That was my biggest worry was just make sure I could still get open on pass plays and routes. That was all I really worried about. My hands stayed the same. I'm going to keep getting better at it.

"It's just working on getting open. I worked with Aaron (Fontes) whatever chance I got. Trying to create separation. That was really my main focus was to make sure I get open. All the rest comes with football intelligence."

Q: You've also returned a few kicks, so what has your mindset been going into games knowing you might have a chance to get your hands on one?

A: "I just want to pop one. I just want to make one go. I want to make coach (Bobby) Hauck proud. That's just what I want to do now that I'm back there. Hold it down until 5 (Junior Bergen) gets back."

Q: Whether receiver or returning kicks, how has it felt to be out in the open field with the ball in your hands again?

A: "I felt like I was home. I felt like that's someplace I needed to be. I can't think of any other way to say it. It just felt great. It felt wholesome."

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.

HOW WE SEE THE BIG SKY

406 MT Sports writers like Griz to get bounce-back win

BILL SPELTZ | 406 MT Sports

It's worth noting Montana's only two regular-season losses the past two seasons have come in dome settings.

There was the setback at Northern Arizona last year and the stunner at North Dakota last Saturday. Stunning because the Grizzlies led by 17 points in the second half.



VICTOR FLORES

19-5



FRANK GOGOLA

21-3



BILL SPELTZ

21-3

I'm not making any excuses for the Griz, but I have to wonder if maybe they ran out of steam, just a little, in both instances. That's taking nothing away from the Lumberjacks or Fighting Hawks — it's more a notion that a little extra fatigue could make a difference in a close game.

I've been covering games in domes for 40 years and I've seen some amazing comebacks. Saturday's rally by the Hawks reminded me of a high school state championship I covered in the 1990s at the UNI-Dome in Iowa where the team that was used to playing outside in the cold dominated the first half and wilted like a daisy in winter in the second half.

Playing football inside is different, and not just because of crowd noise. The air is not as fresh and the warm confines can catch up with a guy, especially a big guy up front on the offensive or defensive line.

Anyway, it's just a theory. Certainly the Grizzlies would never use it as an excuse. They'll be rarin'

to go at home this Saturday in a game against heavy underdog Morehead State.

Unlike most other conferences on the FCS level, Pioneer League institutions do not award athletic scholarships to football players. That's the league Morehead State plays in along with the likes of San Diego (a somewhat familiar Griz playoff foe from the past) and Drake University.

The fact mighty Montana is hosting a Kentucky school gives an indication of

how tough it is for FCS teams west of the Mississippi River to schedule nonconference FCS foes.

The Eagles finished seventh in the 11-team Pioneer League last year with a record of 3-5. An eight-game schedule is exceedingly small compared to the 2023 Grizzlies, who played almost twice as many games (13-2).

Montana is a decided favorite to clip the Eagles inside Washington-Grizzly Stadium. Wagering money on Morehead State to win at elevation on Saturday is probably the equivalent of donating to those taking your wager.

However, nothing is for certain, right? The Eagles would need a minor miracle to do it, but they might stay with Montana for a while if they can catch the Grizzlies feeling overconfident or distracted or force a few turnovers early.

Don't expect that to happen. Montana coach Bobby Hauck has always been pretty good at getting his team in the right frame of mind for games it is expected to win comfortably. That likely will not change this weekend.

Here's a look Saturday's Big Sky Conference games:

Morehead State (2-0) at No. 8 Montana (1-1), 1 p.m. TV: MTN Sports.

The Eagles do have a nice record going, but the wins are over Central State (Ohio) and NAIA Kentucky Christian. That's a little like Montana scheduling NAIA Carroll College. Central State gave Morehead State a good game on opening day, losing 17-10. But last weekend Central State was humiliated by an NCAA Division II team, Grand Valley State, by the score of 58-0. All of that amounts to nothing once the game is under way Saturday at Washington-Grizzly Stadium, but it does give you a clue just how remote the chances are of Morehead State winning. **Speltz:** Montana 48, Morehead State 7. **Gogola:** Montana 49, Morehead State 10. **Flores:** Montana 38, Morehead State 14.

Idaho State (1-1) at No. 10 North Dakota (1-1), noon, ESPN+. Now that we've seen what the Fighting Hawks are capable of at home, I expect them to beat the Bengals. Idaho State did thump Division II Western Oregon last week. And the Bengals did stay with Oregon State for a little more than a half two weeks ago. It's just that UND has things rolling

and it's hard to bet against them at the Alerus Center. **Speltz:** Fighting Hawks 32, Bengals 21. **Gogola:** North Dakota 35, Idaho State 13. **Flores:** North Dakota 41, Idaho State 24.

No. 17 Albany (1-1) at No. 4 Idaho (1-1), 2 p.m., ESPN+. Are the Vandals the best team in the Big Sky Conference? Not if you're asking me, because I've seen Montana State do some impressive things the first three weeks of the season. But Idaho could make a weak case after pushing mighty Oregon two weeks ago and stunning FBS Wyoming at 7,000-plus feet in Laramie last Saturday. The problem is, Idaho has major injury concerns at quarterback. That does not bode well for Big Sky play, although the Vandals will win this weekend. **Speltz:** Vandals 24, Great Danes 20. **Gogola:** Idaho 31, Albany 17. **Flores:** Idaho 31, Albany 13.

No. 6 South Dakota (1-1) at Portland State (0-1, 0-2), 2 p.m., ESPN+. You'd think maybe this would be the Vikings' chance to get their first win in front of the home folks. But the Coyotes are extra good this year. They played Wisconsin tough last weekend in Madison and rolled over Northern State in their opener. Portland State has been blown out twice, including a 43-16 shellacking at Weber State last weekend. **Speltz:** Coyotes 31, Vikings 21. **Gogola:** South Dakota 34, Portland State 16. **Flores:** South Dakota 52, Portland State 14.

Abilene Christian (1-1) at Northern Colorado (0-2), 2 p.m. Abilene Christian is a member of the United Athletic Conference, in case you're interested. The Wildcats almost took down Texas Tech in their opener, losing 52-51. Last week they outlasted West Georgia, 38-24. The Bears will keep this close but I'm going with the Wildcats because of their offensive firepower. **Speltz:** Wildcats 34, Bears 30. **Gogola:** Abilene Christian 28, Northern Colorado 27. **Flores:** Abilene Christian 28, Northern Colorado 10.

Eastern Washington (1-1) at Southeastern Louisiana (0-2), 5 p.m. I was surprised the Eagles lost at home to non-scholarship Drake Saturday, especially after they piled up 45 points in a debut win. It appears Eastern is going to be dangerous all season on the offensive side but may struggle to stop the opposition. That said, I'm going with the Eagles

this week because Southeastern Louisiana has not shown much offense in a pair of losses to FBS foes. **Speltz:** EWU 38, SE Louisiana 28. **Gogola:** Southeastern Louisiana 35, Eastern Washington 34. **Flores:** SLU 42, EWU 31.

No. 20 Weber State (1-0, 1-1) at Lamar (1-1), 5 p.m., ESPN+. Lamar dropped its first home game to Mississippi Valley State last weekend. Weber State got a jump on the Big Sky competition with a convincing league debut win over Portland State. The Wildcats will play at Washington-Grizzly Stadium next month and that game is looking like a tougher task now for Montana. **Speltz:** Wildcats 34, Cardinals 24. **Gogola:** Weber State 41, Lamar 31. **Flores:** Weber State 31, Lamar 20.

No. 15 UC Davis (1-1) at Southern Utah (1-1), 6 p.m., ESPN+. Southern Utah won in overtime at UTEP last week, so the Thunderbirds deserve respect. The Aggies are going to have their hands full in Cedar City and, unlike my 406 peers, I'm predicting they'll take it on the chin Saturday. **Speltz:** SUU 28, UC Davis 27. **Gogola:** UC Davis 37, Southern Utah 21. **Flores:** UC Davis 34, Southern Utah 17.

Northern Arizona (1-1) at Utah Tech (0-2), 6 p.m. The Lumberjacks played the Arizona Wildcats tough last week in dropping a 22-10 verdict. The Trailblazers were blown out at home on opening day by Montana State and just don't seem to have the offense clicking. **Speltz:** Jacks 31, Trailblazers 13. **Gogola:** Northern Arizona 38, Utah Tech 15. **Flores:** NAU 28, Utah Tech 3.

Western Oregon at Cal Poly (0-2), 6 p.m., ESPN+. The Mustangs have had a rough start with a debut loss at non-scholarship San Diego and a blowout loss at Stanford. They'll get their first win this week over the Division II Wolves. **Speltz:** Cal Poly 45, Western Oregon 17. **Gogola:** Cal Poly 42, Western Oregon 20. **Flores:** Cal Poly 35, Western Oregon 7.

No. 24 Nicholls (0-2) at No. 11 Sacramento State (0-2), 7 p.m. Two teams that have taken their lumps against FBS competition will vie for their first win Saturday. Look for the Hornets to prevail at home. **Speltz:** Hornets 41, Colonels 31. **Gogola:** Sacramento State 45, Nicholls 28. **Flores:** Sac State 28, Nicholls 24.

Casey

Continued

like he has. He had the build for it and the work ethic. It was only a matter of time. He did a good job developing himself.”

Casey took over as a starter in 2022 and hasn't relinquished that role. He's started in all 30 games since the beginning of that season. His 32 career starts at UM are the most of any player on the roster this year.

He was the starting right tackle during Montana's run to winning the Big Sky championship and finishing as the FCS national runner-up in 2023. He had come to UM with visions of winning a national title, and his commitment to the program has aided its rise while he has helped anchor the offensive line.

He went into his senior year as a preseason All-American and All-Big Sky O-lineman. He also was voted by his teammates as a captain this year. That's nothing new for him because he was a team captain in high school too.

“He's got the right temperament,” Hauck said. “He's really taken on a leadership role in that room, which is awesome. He's a quality to his team and his family and does things right. I think he does a really good job in that room of showing the younger guys how it's done and helping coach them and leading by example.”

Using all five years of his eligibility at UM is what Casey envisioned when he signed in 2019. He wanted to get multiple degrees and he earned the first last year with a bachelor's in business management. He's now working on an MBA.

Casey has seen himself grow as a player and a person through the rigors of college football. He credits the lessons he learned in childhood, especially that one in regards to soccer, with helping him on his journey at UM, where his commitment has been unquestioned.

“I think I'm a lot tougher,” he said. “I think coming in I had done whatever I needed to do to get by. You come to a place like Montana where we still kind of have some of the old-school ways and the first thing you learn is how to be tough — how to be mentally tough and how to be physically tough.”

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.

GO GRIZ!



COME SEE US!

1701 STEPHENS AVE • 1650 W BROADWAY • 4921 N RESERVE

Griz

CMC
Copper Mountain Coffee



MISSOULA'S LIQUOR EMPORIUM WHERE LOCAL MEETS GLOBAL

1300 S. RESERVE ST.
KRISCOLIQUOR.COM
LOCALLY OWNED & OPERATED

Krisco
LIQUOR

TAILGATING? GET YOUR SUPPLIES AT KRISCO!

OPEN AT 8:00AM ON ALL HOME-GAME SATURDAYS.

TAKE **HEART** TAKE **COMFORT**
TAKE **CARE**



Wherever your journey leads, there are a few things you should take along so you can always give your best.

Things like Heart. Comfort. And Care.

And with Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Montana standing by your side, you can also take charge—confident that the support and peace of mind you need will always be within reach.



 **BlueCross BlueShield** of Montana *Through it all.*

A Division of Health Care Service Corporation, a Mutual Legal Reserve Company, an Independent Licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association



GO GRIZ!

GOOD LUCK
FROM TEAM TESTER!

**JON
TESTER**
U.S. SENATE



GET INVOLVED!

[JONTESTER.COM/VOLUNTEER](https://jontester.com/volunteer)

PAID FOR BY MONTANANS FOR TESTER

X @jontester

Instagram @jontester

@jontester

facebook.com/jontester