

GRIZZLY GAME DAY

Missoulian

FIGHTER'S MENTALITY

Garrett Hustedt
crafts full-circle
journey after
injuries

BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

ROSTERS, PAGE 2 • Q&A WITH OL LIAM BROWN, PAGE 4 • SPELTZ PICKS THE BIG SKY, PAGE 5



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MONTANA ROSTER

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

TENNESSEE STATE ROSTER

No.	Name	Year	Pos.	Hgt.	Wt.	Hometown														
0	Karate Brenson	R-Jr.	WR	6-2	215	St. Louis, Mo.	19	Aiden Smith	R-So.	WR	6-0	180	Houston, Texas	51	Alex Valbuena	R-So.	OL	6-0	275	Antioch, Tenn.
0	Tyler Moore	Fr.	DL	5-10	290	Locust Grove, Ga.	20	Shivan Abdullah	R-Fr.	QB	6-0	205	Nashville, Tenn.	52	Carson Buchanan	Sr.	LS	6-0	250	Nashville, Tenn.
1	Draylen Ellis	Gr.	QB	6-1	175	Olive Branch, Miss.	21	Tevin Carter	R-So.	QB	6-3	230	Memphis, Tenn.	53	Blake Gamez	R-Jr.	OL	6-1	280	Buckeye, Ariz.
1	Boogie Trotter	Jr.	DB	5-9	180	Nashville, Tenn.	21	Tyler Jones	R-Sr.	DB	6-0	200	Orlando, Fla.	54	Darius Neals	R-Fr.	OL	6-4	335	Ellenwood, Ga.
2	Cameron Blaylock	R-Jr.	DL	6-2	315	Memphis, Tenn.	22	Jalen Rouse	Sr.	RB	5-11	195	Richmond Hill, Ga.	55	Saidou Ba	R-So.	OL	6-4	300	Memphis, Tenn.
2	Jordan Gant	R-So.	RB	5-10	205	Lakeland, Fla.	22	DuJuan Sharp III	R-Fr.	DB	5-8	170	Nashville, Tenn.	55	Camron Douglas	R-So.	DL	6-3	300	Brownsville, Tenn.
3	Solomon Dunn	R-Jr.	WR	6-4	210	Johnson City, Tenn.	23	CJ Evans	R-Sr.	RB	5-8	180	Mobile, Ala.	56	Anthony Smith	R-Sr.	OL	6-3	305	Lakeland, Fla.
3	Micah Gay	R-So.	LB	6-1	205	Johns Creek, Ga.	24	Jordan Helton	Sr.	DB	6-1	205	Memphis, Tenn.	57	Connor Meadows	R-So.	OL	6-4	300	Trenton, Tenn.
4	Jaden McGill	Jr.	RB	6-0	205	Chicago, Ill.	25	Sammy Taylor	R-Fr.	LB	6-2	205	Nashville, Tenn.	58	Hadine Diaby	So.	OL	6-3	300	Loganville, Ga.
4	Kierron Smith	Gr.	DL	6-0	335	Fitzgerald, Ga.	26	Johnathan Moore	R-Fr.	RB	5-11	200	Smyrna, Tenn.	61	Kennedy Wilbert	Gr.	OL	6-1	295	Memphis, Tenn.
5	Jalen Bell	Gr.	DL	6-1	280	Detroit, Mich.	27	Byron Davis	So.	DB	6-1	185	Nashville, Tenn.	62	Chazan Page	Sr.	OL	6-1	295	Nashville, Tenn.
5	Dayron Johnson	Sr.	WR	5-9	180	Springfield, Tenn.	28	Kaiki Baker	Fr.	DB	6-3	190	Nashville, Tenn.	63	Jamari Freeman	R-So.	OL	6-4	300	Fairburn, Ga.
6	Dion Villiers	R-So.	DB	6-0	195	Lakeland, Fla.	29	Antwone Parker	Sr.	RB	6-1	225	Fort Worth, Texas	64	Justin Harper	Fr.	OL	6-3	265	St. Petersburg, Fla.
6	Bryant Williams	Jr.	WR	6-1	190	New Orleans, La.	30	Jordan Buchanan	R-So.	CB	6-1	168	Suwanee, Ga.	65	Jacob Wooden	Sr.	OL	6-4	305	Nashville, Tenn.
7	Juice Majors	So.	WR	5-9	155	Nashville, Tenn.	30	Dominique Dixon	Fr.	DB	6-1	195	St. Louis, Mo.	67	Veguer Jean-Jumeau	Fr.	OL	6-7	275	Nashville, Tenn.
7	Ahmad Nelson	Sr.	LB	6-2	225	Birmingham, Ala.	31	Anakin Aupui	Jr.	LB	5-11	220	Compton, Calif.	68	Quinton Mastropietro	Jr.	OL	6-4	305	Mountain View, Calif.
8	Jalal Dean	Sr.	WR	6-0	190	Williamston, S.C.	32	Jayden Coleman	Fr.	DB	5-10	180	Phenix City, Ala.	70	Darien Farmer	R-Fr.	OL	6-0	300	Aurora, Ill.
8	Jalen McClendon	R-Jr.	DB	6-0	180	Tampa, Fla.	33	Taeshawn Jefferson	Fr.	DB	5-11	185	Nashville, Tenn.	72	Kaleob Onyehialam	R-Fr.	OL	6-6	325	Harvest, Ala.
9	Da'Shon Davis	Gr.	WR	5-11	195	Quincy, Fla.	34	Mecca Carr-Bordeaux	R-Fr.	DL	6-4	265	Rocky Point, N.C.	74	Jourden Hale-Frater	R-So.	OL	6-5	350	Cincinnati, Ohio
9	Spencer Roof	Jr.	DB	6-0	200	Arlington, Texas	35	C.J. Lowe	Jr.	LB	6-0	190	Memphis, Tenn.	77	Owen Borba	Fr.	OL	6-3	280	Lebanon, Tenn.
10	George Hamsley	R-So.	QB	6-5	220	Memphis, Tenn.	36	Aden Marshall	Fr.	LB	6-2	205	Paris, Tenn.	78	Kobe Jones	Fr.	OL	6-3	310	Cumming, Ga.
10	Fondren Hollis III	R-Sr.	DB	5-11	180	Decatur, Ga.	37	Jacorris Foreman	R-Fr.	LB	5-11	205	Pahokee, Fla.	80	TySean Jefferson	R-Jr.	WR	5-7	170	Nashville, Tenn.
11	Snap Reed	Fr.	WR	6-2	200	Memphis, Tenn.	38	Gabriel McDaniel	R-Sr.	DB	5-10	170	Nashville, Tenn.	81	Santana Crayton	Fr.	WR	5-10	185	Louisville, Ky.
11	Brent Rowe	Jr.	LB	6-1	230	Milwaukee, Wis.	39	Mark Shenouda	R-Fr.	P	6-1	210	Mt. Juliet, Tenn.	83	Joshua Meriwether	Gr.	TE	6-2	230	Nashville, Tenn.
12	Sanders Ellis	Fr.	LB	6-2	225	Nashville, Tenn.	40	Marlon Huff	Fr.	DL	6-3	230	Delray Beach, Fla.	8						

Hustedt punches back

Nebraska native earns career highlight after return from 2 injuries

FRANK GOGOLA
406 MT Sports

Garrett Hustedt finally got his cathartic moment.

The Montana senior dropped back into coverage and intercepted a pass against Cal Poly on the first weekend of November in California. He couldn't believe what was happening as he ran with the ball for 29 yards.

It was his first pick, and it came in the sixth season of a career spanning two teams and two positions. It's been a final run that he almost didn't return for after considering three times in the offseason whether it was worth it.

"When I caught the ball, I was like, 'Holy cow. I have the ball,'" Hustedt recalled of that interception prior to Montana's first-round playoff game against Tennessee State at 8:15 p.m. MT on Saturday in Washington-Grizzly Stadium.

"The first five steps felt like slow motion. Before I knew it, I was down on the ground and everyone was running up to me. It was just a moment that was so real. All the adrenaline. It's going to be the highlight of my career."

He had already been a part of a team-wide highlight when Montana won the Big Sky Conference title and made the FCS championship game in 2023. He thought that would be a good way to cap his career, so he was considering hanging up his cleats.

He walked into Bobby Hauck's office after the game and told the head coach he was leaning toward not using his final season of eligibility. He left feeling like he was still wanted, prayed on his decision and decided to return.

"I just thought, 'I'm never going to have a moment like this again to be able to hang out with my



BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Montana linebacker Garrett Hustedt (56) celebrates with Montana cornerback Ronald Jackson (2) during the college football game between Montana and Western Carolina on Sept. 21 at Washington-Grizzly Stadium in Missoula. Hustedt broke his collarbone twice in the offseason but decided each time to return to UM for his final year of eligibility.

friends and this community and these coaches and these players and the fan base," he said. "It's really been an honor and I wouldn't trade this year for anything else. I'm so glad I came back for it."

Hustedt was back on the field for spring camp playing a new position, having moved from defensive end to linebacker. He had started twice and played in 26 games at D-end in 2022 and 2023 but Montana was in need of backers.

Hustedt had some experience with linebacker at Nebraska from 2019-21, but it had been a while since he played that role. He was

still relearning the eye work, didn't see a split zone, took a hit and went down the first week of camp.

"I broke my collarbone in four pieces," he said. "I had a plate and eight screws in there. The surgery actually took longer than it was supposed to because it was so mangled. When I looked at the image, I was like, 'Holy cow. I look like I'm an iron man right now with that.'"

That left Hustedt with his second big decision of the offseason. It was the same question he had contemplated before: Would he end his career early?

He had never had an injury like the broken collarbone that required nearly 12 weeks of rehab. That forced him to miss the rest of spring camp and would hinder his development of learning to play linebacker in UM's 3-3-5 defense.

He came back and worked his way back for player-run practices. Then June came around. He landed awkwardly and broke his collarbone again. That same question popped up: Did he want to still return for a final year?

"Coach called me after that second time I broke it and said, 'You know, I get it, and I understand if you don't want to come back for

this next year,'" he recalled. "I decided against it. I said, 'You know what, I'm going to push on, I'm going to do everything I can and I'm going to come back.'"

That's just what Hustedt has done.

His rehab the second time around spilled into the regular season. He missed fall camp, another pivotal period to continue learning a new position.

He finally saw the field in the fourth game of the year. He totaled four tackles and one pass breakup in the win over Western Carolina in Missoula.

"That first play, I was jumping, I was excited, it was adrenaline all over again," he said. "Funny enough, it was my first live tackle. They wanted me to live tackle in practice. I said, 'No, if this thing breaks again, I want it to break in a game.'"

It was a long road back for Hustedt, who has played in every game since returning. It was a journey he never had to make before, but it was one that he was being prepared for his whole life.

His faith guided him in his choice to return all three times and through rehab. He had also relied on that cornerstone of his life when deciding to transfer from home state Nebraska — he's an Omaha native — to Montana because he was buried on the depth chart.

"What I'm most proud of is coming back this year and being a spiritual leader," he said. "There's this opportunity I was given to pray in front of the team. I took that and I give maybe a three- or four-minute speech before every game in the locker room."

"It's like I'm preaching in the moment. It comes up spontaneously and it's what's on my heart."

Faith wasn't the only important guiding aspect from Hustedt's upbringing. He was raised in a house with four sisters as the middle

BROWN FINDS 'HOME' ON LINE



SHANNA MADISON, MISSOULIAN

Montana Grizzlies offensive lineman Liam Brown (79) warms up before the Brawl of the Wild football game on Nov. 23 at Bobcat Stadium in Bozeman. Brown has started all 12 games this season, including the past 10 at left guard.

Oregon native moves from center to guard, starts past 10 games

FRANK GOGOLA
406 MT Sports

Liam Brown has played musical chairs moving from right guard to center to left guard and has even seen some snaps at left tackle over the past three years with the Montana football team.

The junior has settled in at left guard for the Grizzlies this season. He's started the past 10 games at that spot on the offensive line after beginning the year with two starts at center.

Brown is up to 26 career starts and 35 appearances at Montana. The native of Beaverton, Oregon, is playing at 6-foot-5 and 317 pounds this season.

In 2023, he made seven starts at left guard and had 11 appearances on the offensive line and special teams. In 2022, he started seven times at right guard and played in 12 games on the O-line and special teams.

Pro Football Focus graded Brown as the No. 29 guard in the FCS and No. 21 pass blocker entering this season. HERO Sports named him the best FCS player wearing the No. 79 jersey this year.

Brown sat down with 406 MT Sports prior to Montana's first-round playoff game against Tennessee State at 8:15 p.m. MT on Saturday in Washington-Grizzly Stadium. This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Q: Nice to finally meet you. How have you been enjoying Missoula so far?

A: "I love it. In my opinion, it's not much different than my hometown back in Beaverton, Oregon. But it's so much better — the scenery and everything."

Q: This year is the most starts you've made in a season, so how are you holding up this late in the year?

A: "I am feeling a lot better than I expected, honestly. Beat up a bit, but everyone at this point of the season is."

Q: Why are you feeling better than you thought right now?

A: "I took a lot more time working on my flexibility so I could get in the positions that last year would have hurt me and just bounce right back out of it. It was extra stretching, so I focused on joint mobility, everything like that. Worked on my hamstrings. Just made

sure everything was flexible, so it could bend weirdly and not snap on me."

Q: Is that yoga classes you were doing?

A: "No, just YouTube videos."

Q: How do you feel you've been fitting in at guard after spending the offseason learning center and starting the year at center?

A: "I played guard last year, but it just feels like a home. That's the best way to put it. Center was a little unnatural feeling for me at first, but I was starting to get used to it. And then the team thought we'd be better with me at guard and Cade (Klimczak) at center. I'm just happy to be here."

Q: What are the differences between guard and center beside not snapping the ball?

A: "The biggest difference between a center and guard is center you tell people what to do and guard you're told what to do. That's the biggest difference I've seen so far."

Q: You had played guard on the right side of the line before, so how different is guard on the left side?

A: "The big difference is just stance and everything. Once you get comfortable in that, it's just the exact same really."

Q: You've had some older brothers play college football, right? Did you guys ever get to play against one another?

A: "Two of them at Portland State. One was their starting left tackle and one was a backup defensive end. One was older than the other, so the youngest that played there, he graduated COVID year, so right before I got up here."

Q: You've never lost to Portland State, so how big have those games against the Vikings been in your household?

A: "For me, it's a personal rivalry game because every time we play them, I'm always just like, 'My brothers played for them.' It just means a little more playing them, to me, than a different team."

Q: Anything else you'd like to add about yourself or the season?

A: "We're just going to keep fighting and just keep hitting people."

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

BILL SPELTZ
406 MT Sports

Toothless is a good word to describe the Montana offense in last week's loss at undefeated Montana State.

The unit was set up for success by a scrappy Griz defense but just couldn't sustain drives or come up with big plays. It marked the second straight week the Montana offense had moments where it seemed downright anemic.

If you can recall back to Montana's last regular-season home game, the Griz failed to score in the first half against Portland State, which finished at the bottom in the FCS in yardage allowed. That provided rock-solid proof the struggle is real for the UM offense right now.



VICTOR FLORES

63-14



FRANK GOGOLA

63-14



BILL SPELTZ

63-14

It will be interesting to see how the Grizzlies bounce back from last weekend's Brawl loss. Tennessee State's defense has held eight opponents to 21 points or less this season, so Montana won't have a cakewalk in its playoff opener.

The winner of the Montana-Tennessee State game will get an all-expenses paid trip to Brookings, South Dakota, for a showdown with two-time defending FCS champion South Dakota State. Yikes.

It's best to not even think about that hurdle until clearing Saturday's inside Washington-Grizzly Stadium.

Here's a look at this Saturday's two first-round playoff games involving Big Sky Conference teams:

The good news is the Griz offense doesn't have to face the stingy, Big Sky Conference champion Bobcats this Saturday. Montana State's defense, which allowed 28 points in road games earlier this month against Eastern Washington and UC Davis, saved some of its best for its last regular-season game in a 34-11 win over Montana.

It's not just one thing that stalled the Montana offense in losses to UC Davis and Montana State this month. No one quarterback is to blame. Logan Fife and Keali'i Ah Yat have both had moments where they have looked good and looked bad.

The secret formula for the Grizzlies may be getting back to basics in their playoff opener against visiting Tennessee State on Saturday night. Try to play ball control, high-percentage football with a strong ground game. Running back Eli Gillman is a force and, with any luck, punishing back Nick Ostmo will also be available after limping off the field with a knee injury Saturday at Bobcat Stadium.

Montana's offensive struggles make it hard to predict what will happen Saturday night. The Grizzlies are always going to be a tough out with their loud home crowd, but how much smaller will that crowd be since Saturday's game is being televised on ESPN2 and played so late? Plus the Griz traditionally do not draw as well for home playoff games two days after Thanksgiving.



SHANNA MADISON, MISSOULIAN

Montana running back Eli Gillman is tackled by Montana State linebacker Bryce Grebe (10) and cornerback Andrew Powdrell in the 123rd Brawl of the Wild game on Saturday at Bobcat Stadium in Bozeman.

Tennessee State (9-3) at No. 14 seed Montana (8-4), 8:15 p.m. TV: ESPN2. If momentum counts for anything, the Grizzlies are going to have their hands full. The Tigers are riding a three-game winning streak and Montana is coming off a humbling loss in the Brawl of the Wild that saw several key skill players go out with injuries. But one score that stands out on Tennessee State's schedule is 52-3 — that was the final tally when the Tigers were whipped at North Dakota State in early September. One reason why I predict Montana will win this game is the Grizzlies are used to playing a much tougher conference schedule. Five Big Sky teams reached the playoffs. Montana played three of them and managed a home win over playoff-qualifying Northern Arizona back on Oct. 12, 31-20. If UM can get back to playing consistent offensive football the way it did when it beat the Lumberjacks, it will win comfortably Saturday. If not, Tennessee State may take the Griz right down to the wire. **Speltz:** Montana 24, Tennessee State 21. **Gogola:** Griz 31, Tigers 17. **Flores:** Griz 27, TSU 10.

Northern Arizona (7-4) at No. 15 seed Abilene Christian

(8-4), 1 p.m. TV: ESPN+. Kudos to the Lumberjacks for finishing a spot ahead of Montana in the Big Sky race at 6-2 and for reaching the playoffs with a surge of five-straight wins starting in mid-October. On the other hand, NAU has not beaten even one Big Sky team with a winning record and didn't have to play Montana State or UC Davis, which finished 1-2 in the standings. It's all well and good the Jacks reached the playoffs for the first time since 2017. But winning on the road against a team that was ranked just outside the top 10 before last week's 32-19 road loss to Stephen F. Austin is a tall order. The Wildcats are 4-1 at home and their only loss came in a nail-biter with Idaho in September, 27-24. Still, Abilene may be without its star quarterback, Maverick McIvor, who left last Saturday's game in the first half with an unspecified injury (possible concussion). As a result, I'm picking the Jacks to earn their biggest road win in a long time. **Speltz:** Lumberjacks 27, Wildcats 24. **Gogola:** NAU 23, ACU 21. **Flores:** ACU 24, NAU 20.

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SHANNA MADISON, MISSOULIAN

Montana Grizzlies linebacker Garrett Hustedt (56) warms up before the Brawl of the Wild football game on Nov. 23 at Bobcat Stadium in Bozeman.

Hustedt

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child of the five siblings.

Physically fighting wasn't allowed, so he had to become in tune with his emotions to talk things through and solve problems through communication. It's something that's served him well in football.

"It's helped me with being able to read people's body language," he said. "If they're having a bad day, their head's down on the sideline, being able to know what to say in certain moments based on who somebody is. It's going to lead me into my career, but it's been fruitful for this season."

He has already graduated from Montana with a bachelor's degree in psychology and a minor in business administration. He's the first of his siblings to earn a

bachelor's degree, he said, and to play college sports.

He's working on a Master of Business Administration, which would make him the first person in his entire family to earn a master's degree, he said. He's considering multiple avenues when he graduates in the spring.

"That's another part of the reason why I came back," he said. "Just to be able to finish that and say I'm not going to quit on that too."

He never quit — not on himself and not on his team. It's a decision that has been worth it to him.

"So many times I wanted to throw in the towel and I wanted to say no," he said. "And I just knew in my life I didn't want to be a quitter. I knew that this isn't going to be the first time I'm going to be faced with adversity where something doesn't go my way. It's up to

what I choose. And I chose to fight."

He's punched back every time. He's up to 17 tackles, the second most he's had in six college seasons, while his average of 1.9 per game is a career high.

He was also rewarded with a memorable play at Cal Poly when he recorded his first interception in his 33rd career game. It was his full-circle moment.

"I had my trainers come up to me and say, 'That was a big deal,'" he recalled. "All my coaches and all my friends were just saying, 'Hey, you did it. You fought the good fight! That moment was surreal for me.'"

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.

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Grizzlies receive No. 14 seed

FRANK GOGOLA
406 MT Sports

The Montana football team will get one home play-off game before hitting the road for potentially multiple weeks if it hopes to make an improbable run back to the FCS national championship game.

The Grizzlies received the No. 14 seed in the 24-team tournament on Sunday morning when the FCS playoff committee unveiled its selections. They'll host a first-round game against unseeded Tennessee State at 8:15 p.m. MT on Saturday at Washington-Grizzly Stadium in Missoula on ESPN 2.

UM finished the regular season with an 8-4 overall record and a 5-3 mark in the Big Sky Conference to end up fifth in the league standings. The Griz had won the crown last year and were picked as the preseason favorite this year.

"Everybody's zero and zero," UM linebacker Ryan Tirrell said of the playoffs. "Start of a new season. So, I don't mind the position we're in. It's certainly not where we want to be, but we're willing to fight and go deep in the playoffs."

Tennessee State went 9-3 overall and 6-2 in the Big South-OVC to finish in a four-way tie for first place in the conference. The Tigers, coached by former NFL player Eddie George, were one of the last four teams to make the field.

A first-round win would send the Griz on the road in the second round to play at No. 3 seed South Dakota State (10-2), which earned a first-round bye. The potential path beyond that would include two more road games unless an upset is sprung by a team seeded lower than Montana or an unseeded

"Everybody's zero and zero. Start of a new season. So, I don't mind the position we're in. It's certainly not where we want to be, but we're willing to fight and go deep in the playoffs."

— Ryan Tirrell,
UM linebacker

team.

"I think that we haven't really put together a full game yet," Montana running back Nick Ostmo said. "We're excited for the opportunity to go play more football."

In the quarterfinals, the Griz could play No. 6 Incarnate Word, No. 11 Villanova or unseeded Eastern Kentucky. In the semifinals, they could face No. 2 North Dakota State, No. 7 Mercer, No. 10 Rhode Island, No. 15 Abilene Christian, or unseeded teams Northern Arizona and Central Connecticut State.

On the other side of the bracket are No. 1 Montana State, No. 4 South Dakota, No. 5 UC Davis, No. 8 Idaho, No. 9 Richmond, No. 12 Illinois State, No. 13 Tarleton State, No. 16 New Hampshire and unseeded teams UT Martin, Lehigh, Southeast Missouri State and Drake. MSU is the Big Sky's first No. 1 seed since UM in 2009; a rematch this year could only happen in the title game.

The national championship game will be played at 5 p.m. MT on Monday, Jan. 6, 2025, at Toyota Stadium in Frisco, Texas, a suburb north of Dallas. It's the 15th consecutive year the title tilt

will be contested at that neutral site after it had been held in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the previous 13 years.

This is the fifth time in six seasons since head coach Bobby Hauck returned in 2018 that Montana has made the postseason. It is just the second time in those five qualifications that UM failed to earn a first-round bye. Montana has advanced past the quarterfinals just once in the previous four appearances.

In 2023, UM earned the No. 2 seed and home games through the semifinals. The Griz used that home-field advantage to advance to the FCS title game for the first time since 2009. They then lost to No. 1 South Dakota State, 23-3.

Montana is making its 28th trip to the FCS/Division I-AA playoffs, an NCAA record. The Griz hold a 38-25 postseason record, the third most all-time tournament wins. They're 35-7 in home playoff games, all having taken place inside Washington-Grizzly Stadium. They've won eight straight home games in the postseason, last losing to Coastal Carolina in the second round in 2013.

UM has won national titles in 1995 and 2001. The Griz have made the title game eight times, finishing as the runner-up in 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2009 and 2023. Coach Bobby Hauck led them to three runner-up finishes in his 2003-09 stint. He's taken them to the chipper once since returning in 2018.

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.



SHANNA MADISON, MISSOULIAN

Montana Grizzlies running back Eli Gillman (10) runs as Montana State's Andrew Powdrell (1) and Bryce Grebe (10) pursue during the Brawl of the Wild football game on Nov. 23 at Bobcat Stadium in Bozeman.

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