

GRIZZLY GAME DAY

Missoulian

LEE'S

Jaxon Lee, grandfather
share special bond
through Griz football

SUMMIT

BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

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MONTANA ROSTER

No.	Name	Year	Pos.	Hgt.	Wt.	Hometown	22	Retired in Honor of Terry Dillon					59	Hayden Opitz	R-Fr.	LB	6-2	224	Helena, Mont.	
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	Keali'i 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 Kluewich	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	Missoula, 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	Retired in Honor of Dave Dickenson						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 Lehrmann	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 Mason	R-Fr.	DL	6-2	256	Ferndale, Wash.	98	Matai Mata'a	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.

WEBER STATE ROSTER

No.	Name	Year	Pos.	Hgt.	Wt.	Hometown	31	Tamal Johnson	Fr.	S	6-0	180	Compton, Calif.	70	Will Way	R-Fr.	OL	6-3	285	Tucson, Ariz.
0	Jalon Rock	Jr.	CB	5-10	165	Arlington, Texas	32	Daniel Asisi	Fr.	LB	6-2	215	Provo, Utah	71	Gavin Ortega	Jr.	OL	6-5	300	Bellingham, Wash.
1	Damon Bankston	Jr.	RB	5-11	190	Katy, Texas	33	Aizik Mahuka	Fr.	LB	6-3	235	Mililani, Hawaii	72	Kaufusi Pakofe Jr.	Jr.	DT	6-3	330	Kahuku, Hawaii
2	Adrian Cormier	So.	RB	5-7	190	Richmond, Texas	34	Colter May	Jr.	RB	6-0	215	Heyburn, Idaho	74	Vae Soifua	So.	OL	6-4	305	Orem, Utah
3	BJ Carey	So.	S	6-1	195	Downey, Calif.	35	Kemari Munier-Bailey	Sr.	DE	6-3	230	Birmingham, England	75	Lavaka Taukeiaho	So.	OL	6-4	315	South Jordan, Utah
4	Jayleen Record	Jr.	WR	5-8	165	Dallas, Texas	36	Donovan Aidoo	Fr.	S	6-1	195	Gilbert, Ariz.	76	Zoom Esplin	R-Fr.	OL	6-8	275	Escintas, Calif.
5	Chauncey Sylvester	Fr.	RB	5-10	200	Long Beach, Calif.	37	Aidan O'Callaghan	Fr.	LB	6-4	225	Huntington Beach, Calif.	77	Kasen Lea	Fr.	OL	6-4	265	Norman, Okla.
6	Alema Tupuola	Jr.	LB	6-0	225	Kaysville, Utah	38	Noah Nahas	Jr.	CB	5-9	165	Draper, Utah	78	Luke Sampson	So.	OL	6-4	280	Draper, Utah
7	Tre Parks-Vinson	So.	CB	5-9	160	Fort Worth, Texas	39	Khalil Stolden	Fr.	S	6-0	190	Arlington, Texas	79	Cole Millward	R-Fr.	OL	6-6	280	West Haven, Utah
8	Creyton Cooper	Jr.	QB	6-3	205	Lehi, Utah	40	Raimoana Tinirauarii	So.	LB	6-2	225	Paea, Tahiti	80	Mason York	Fr.	WR	6-3	195	Huntington Beach, Calif.
9	Trevian Tribble	So.	S	5-11	165	Fontana, Calif.	41	Kyle Thompson	Sr.	K	6-0	215	American Fork, Utah	81	Tajon Evans	So.	WR	6-0	190	San Diego, Calif.
10	Richie Munoz	So.	QB	5-11	215	West Covina, Calif.	42	Jayden Ah You	Jr.	LB	6-1	230	Orem, Utah	82	Kade Moore	So.	WR	5-11	190	Lehi, Utah
11	AJ Jayroe	R-Fr.	WR	6-4	190	Frisco, Texas	43	Kevin Enriquez	So.	LB	6-2	215	Rancho Cucamonga, Calif.	83	Devin Ford	Jr.	WR	6-0	175	Gardena, Calif.
12	Kao Hansen	So.	S	6-3	205	Alpine, Utah	44	Mayson Hitchens	So.	LB	6-1	225	Orange, Calif.	84	Noah Bennee	Jr.	TE	6-4	225	Holladay, Utah
13	Garrett Beck	Sr.	LB	6-4	225	Meridian, Idaho	45	Keayen Nead	So.	TE	6-5	250	Sugar City, Idaho	85	Jaden Thrower	So.	WR	5-11	170	Las Vegas, Nev.
14	Jacob Sharp	Sr.	WR	6-1	180	Vallejo, Calif.	46	Rishi Daniels	R-Fr.	S	5-11	180	Bellevue, Wash.	86	Peter Knudson	Jr.	TE	6-4	240	McCall, Idaho
15	Clarence Butler	So.	RB	5-8	185	Salt Lake City, Utah	47	Oscar Doyle	Fr.	P	6-3	220	Brisbane, Australia	87	Marcus Chretien	So.	WR	6-2	170	Houston, Texas
16	Toddrick Dixon	Jr.	CB	6-0	165	Arlington, Texas	48	Jon Class	Fr.	DE	6-3	230	San Marcos, Calif.	88	Dahlyn Jones	R-Fr.	TE	6-2	220	DeSoto, Texas
17	Zavien Abercrombie	Fr.	CB	5-10	165	Arlington, Texas	49	Grant Sands	Sr.	LS	6-2	220	Gilbert, Ariz.	89	Noah Kjar	Fr.	WR	6-0	195	Draper, Utah
18	Marvin Session	So.	WR	6-1	200	Missouri City, Texas	50	Steven Bryant	Sr.	DT	6-3	270	Myrtle Beach, S.C.	90	Keahnist Thompson	So.	DE	6-3	255	Lakeland, Fla.
19	Dijon Jennings	So.	QB	5-11	195	Reynoldsborg, Ohio	51	Ashden Oberg	So.	DE	6-5	235	Montrose, Colo.	91	Zeke Birch	Sr.	DT	6-4	295	Rexburg, Idaho
20	Montae Pate	So.	CB	6-2	170	North Las Vegas, Nev.	52	Elijah Teriipaia	R-Fr.	LB	6-1	225	Lehi, Utah	93	Ben Beecher	Jr.	DT	6-1	270	Parker, Colo.
21	Pierre Hunter	So.	S	6-0	190	Dallas, Texas	54	Brayden Perry	R-Fr.	LB	6-3	220	Saratoga Springs, Utah	94	Brayden Wilson	Jr.	DE	6-5	255	Kaysville, Utah
22	Ishaan Daniels	R-Fr.	CB	5-10	165	Bellevue, Wash.	55	Jason White	Jr.	OL	6-3	310	Lakewood, Calif.	95	Ammon Munyer	R-Fr.	TE	6-5	245	Rathdrum, Idaho
23	EJ Evett	Jr.	S	6-2	195	Seneca, S.C.	56	Kevin Johnson	Fr.	DT	6-5	245	Downey, Calif.	96	Bronson Childs	So.	DE	6-5	260	Kennewick, Wash.
24	Angel King	Jr.	S	6-1	195	Los Angeles, Calif.	59	Terrance Caldwell	Jr.	OL	6-2	315	Murrieta, Calif.	97	Matt Herron	So.	DT	6-3	275	Holladay, Utah
25	Samson Peaua	So.	TE	6-4	230	Reno, Nev.	62	Jacob Edmonds	R-Fr.	OL	6-2	300	Vacaville, Calif.	98	Jagger Childs	R-Fr.	DT	6-4	275	Kennewick, Wash.
26	Peyton Beck	So.	WR	6-0	190	Bountiful, Utah	63	Trevor Beck	R-Fr.	OL	6-5	295	Boise, Idaho	99	Easton Payne	Jr.	DT	6-3	275	Tremonton, Utah
27	Davion Godley	Fr.	RB	5-8	195	Fulshear, Texas	64	Nelson Arapa	So.	OL	6-4	295	Bora Bora							
28	Logan Mackey	R-Fr.	CB	5-10	180	Houston, Texas	65	Cole Casto	Jr.	OL	6-3	285	Salt Lake City, Utah							
29	Frankie Edwards	Fr.	CB	5-11	175	Moreno Valley, Calif.	66	Hunter Deuel	So.	OL	6-6	300	American Fork, Utah							
30	Major Givens	R-Fr.	RB	5-10	180	Spring Valley, Calif.	68	George Tuiloma	R-Fr.	OL	6-4	270	Provo, Utah							
							69	Sloan Calder	Jr.	K	6-4	180	Morgan, Utah							

Lee fulfills childhood dream



BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Philipsburg native works his way to starting safety role in senior campaign

FRANK GOGOLA
406 MT Sports

Jaxon Lee got two doses of fortunate timing in his junior season.

The Montana safety intercepted a pass against Northern Colorado and ran it back for a touchdown along the home sideline and into the north end zone. He later recovered a fumble and rumbled through the snow against Delaware in the playoffs for another touchdown in the same corner of the same end zone.

Those have been Lee's lone college touchdowns, and each time he got to run right past his grandfather, Pete Smith, who was sitting in the first row of a section near that end zone on the east side of the stadium. Being on the Griz sideline, he went over and shared a special moment with his grandfather.

"Come back running to the sideline and I can grab his hand right there, it's huge," Lee said ahead of Montana's game against Weber State at 1 p.m. on Saturday at Washington-Grizzly Stadium.

"It means the world because he gets all teary-eyed and everything. That's our relationship. It's what we've always looked forward to, and it's really cool that it's happening."

Smith played a role in helping Lee, a senior from Philipsburg, get to where he is as a first-year starter for Montana. He instilled in him a love for the Griz as they'd attend home games along with Lee's uncle, Chris Smith.

They had sat in those same seats where Lee celebrated with his grandfather nearly two decades later. Lee would go to those games wearing the No. 34 jersey of his favorite player — Chase Reynolds, another small-town star from

nearby Drummond — and painting a black Grizzly paw print on his face.

Those experiences with his grandfather helped lay the foundation for his journey.

"He's the biggest impact," Lee said. "I was just with him all the time. He was always bringing me to games. He just loved it too. So, really made a good relationship out of the two of us."

Smith, who is Lee's grandfather on his mother's side, has Anaconda roots. That's where Lee's mother grew up before moving after meeting Lee's father, an Ohio native who fell in love with Montana on a post-college hunting trip.

Lee had grown up early on in Belgrade, so he had been right there in Montana State country surrounded by many Bobcats fans, including friends who were Cats supporters. Smith made sure Lee stuck with him as a Griz diehard.

When Lee spent time at his grandfather's house, they'd watch Griz highlights and replays of the 1995 and 2001 national championship wins. He then was a part of the run to the 2023 title game and his grandfather followed along.

"When my parents went out of town, it was, 'You're going by grandpa's,'" Lee recalled. "I'd be like, 'Oh, yeah, I'm going to go hang out with grandpa and we'll watch football.' Our whole relationship is kind of built around football."

Lee had been attending those games around the same time he got into playing football himself. He had looked up to Reynolds and Marc Mariani, another small-town Montanan, from Havre, who went on to be an All-American. He dreamed himself of one day playing on that same field.

Lee also came up through the small-town ranks, playing for the Drummond-Philipsburg co-op football team. He helped lead the Titans to back-to-back state championships in his sophomore and junior seasons in 2017 and

"I'd always tell him I've always wanted to play here, this is always my lifelong dream."

Jaxon Lee on sharing his aspirations of playing at Wa-Griz with his grandfather

2018 as he started to put himself on the NCAA Division I recruiting map.

Getting to play at Wa-Griz had been a goal since attending those games with his grandfather.

"I'd always tell him I've always wanted to play here, this is always my lifelong dream," Lee recalled. "My uncle Charlie, he'd be there too screaming at the refs. I'm 6 years old, I'm starting to cuss out the refs too. We're hanging over the rails, just so much fun."

Montana wasn't the first on the recruiting trail for Lee. That came from in-state rival Montana State in June following his junior season. The Bobcats were pushing hard after him and he thought he might end up in Bozeman.

He let then-UM offensive coordinator Timm Rosenbach know that the Cats had offered him. The Griz responded with a campus invite, extended an offer after Lee talked with running backs coach Justin Green and he committed by the end of that month.

Lee called his grandfather to tell him about his commitment but didn't make it immediately clear where he would be going.

"He's gonna be so bummed if he has to put on a Cat jersey," Lee recalled, "so when I called him one day and I told him, 'Grandpa, I just committed,' and he goes, 'Oh, I can do it,' and I was like, 'No, I just committed to the Grizzlies!'"

"He was so ecstatic. He was just so pumped for me. It's what we've always talked about, so it was a really big deal for us."

Lee didn't get to play much defense early on during his first three years with the Griz.

Montana safety Jaxon Lee (25) celebrates during the FCS quarterfinal playoff game between Montana and Furman on Dec. 8 at Washington-Grizzly Stadium in Missoula.

Kaho adding linebacker depth

Senior joined Griz in winter after 4 years at San Diego State

FRANK GOGOLA
406 MT Sports

Vai Kaho has made an early impact with the Montana football team.

The senior linebacker led the team in tackles through the first three games of the season. That came even as he has been playing in a new defense after he had transferred to UM in the offseason for his final year of college eligibility.

Kaho is now up to 29 tackles and three sacks for loss, both of which rank second on the team through five games. He also has one sack, which was the game-

sealing stop on fourth down to beat Missouri State in the season opener. All three of those stats are single-season career highs for him.

The native of Reno, Nevada, had spent the previous four seasons at San Diego State, an FBS team in the Mountain West Conference. He played in 41 games and started six times, five of which came in 2023 as he had a then-career-high 23 tackles. He totaled 37 tackles, three TFLs and 0.5 sacks at SDSU.

Kaho sat down with 406 MT Sports prior to Montana's game against Weber State at 1 p.m. on Saturday in Washington-Grizzly Stadium. This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Q: Obviously you transferred in from San Diego State, but how did

you originally end up at SDSU?

A: "Out of the offers I had out of high school, that was a school that I felt could give me the most of what I was looking for, which is just a great team and winning, winning culture at the time. That's kind of how I ended up there. It was a good fit for me."

Q: How did your time playing there end up going for you?

A: "It went well. I'd say I definitely had to learn a lot. I had a lot of growing pains there. But it was a good thing for me. Met a lot of my lifelong friends there."

Q: What were those growing pains?

A: "It was really just getting used to the playbook. We do a lot of similar things here. But it was just really getting used to the coaching style too."

Q: Why did you decide to go into the transfer portal for your final year?

A: "My coaches who had recruited me, they kind of resigned and they left from there. My last year of eligibility is this year, so I just didn't want to have a year figuring it out for my last year. I just wanted to put some good stuff on tape and come to a team that wins."

Q: How did the recruiting with Montana go and why did you choose them?

A: "They had a great run last year. I was watching it as I was getting recruited and they were just winning. That's something that's important to me, and

I just wanted to contribute to that. I saw they were winning a lot of games. And then coming here, man, the culture is definitely a big shock, man. I love the guys here. Everybody's for the team, man, so that's what I'd say kind of hooked me."

Q: How did playing in a 3-3-5 defense at SDSU help you transition to UM?

A: "It is pretty similar. They ran a 3-3-5 there too, so it was a lot of similar scheme, just different vocabulary, but I just had to learn and my teammates and my coaches helped me slow the game down definitely. So, it's been a good transition."

Q: You've already put

up some single-season career highs, so how do you feel the season has been going for you?

A: "Blessed. I give all the glory to God, man. I wouldn't be here without him. I'm just thankful that I kept being persistent in what I did. It's just a credit to my coaches, a credit to my teammates putting me in the right position to make the plays and it's just out there for me to make them."

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.



BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Montana linebacker Vai Kaho (0) looks on during the Big Sky Conference football game between Eastern Washington and Montana on Sept. 28 at Roos Field in Cheney, Washington.



Go Griz!



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1650 W Broadway

HOW WE SEE THE BIG SKY

BILL SPELTZ
406 MT Sports

One aspect of college football you'll never hear much about is physical conditioning.

The assumption is all athletes competing in college — whether it be in football, basketball, tennis or whatever — are in terrific shape. But some teams and athletes are in better shape than others.



**BILL
SPELTZ**

32-9



**VICTOR
FLORES**

32-9



**FRANK
GOGOLA**

33-8

noting Montana was 2-0 in overtime games last season and 6-0 in games decided by eight points or less. And this season, the Grizzlies are 2-1 in games decided by eight points or less.

Whether fitness level plays a role Saturday in Missoula — it may not be much of a factor since Weber State plays home games at 4,300 feet — Montana's game against the Wildcats could be a good one. Weber is 1-2 in road games and lost at home to McNeese last Saturday, 28-26. But the Wildcats are 1-0 in Big Sky play and have beaten UM in two of their

last three meetings.

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

Weber State (1-0, 2-3) at Montana (1-0, 4-1), 1 p.m. TV: Scripps Sports.

The Grizzlies have won their last 14 games at Washington-Grizzly Stadium. They showed in last Saturday's 52-49 win at Eastern Washington there's still a lot of work to be done on the defensive end, but the offense was impressive with Logan Fife at quarterback. Weber was bested by a former Grizzly quarterback last week, McNeese's Clifton McDowell, and my hunch is the Wildcats' defense will be overwhelmed again this week by the current Montana QB — whether it be Fife or Keali'i Ah Yat — in front of an impressive crowd at Washington-Grizzly Stadium. **Speltz:** Montana 34, Weber State 24. **Gogola:** Montana 45, Weber State 21. **Flores:** Griz 34, Weber 24.

Northern Colorado (0-1, 0-5) at Montana State (1-0, 5-0), 2 p.m.

TV: Scripps Sports and ESPN+. This is the easiest pick of the week, mostly because the Bears are really struggling. Last week they lost on their home turf to Cal Poly, 28-7. They have been outscored 166-60 this season. Montana State was not particularly impressive in its win at Idaho State, 37-17, but the Bobcats have some injury issues on their offensive line and that has made their dominant ground game a little less intimidating. This matchup comes at a good time for MSU because the Bobcats will be able to rest some of their banged up standouts and will still steamroll to victory. **Speltz:** Montana State 54, Northern Colorado 10. **Gogola:** Montana State 49, Northern Colorado 9. **Flores:** Cats 48, UNC 0.

UC Davis (1-0, 4-1) at Portland State (0-1, 0-4), 2 p.m. TV: ESPN+.

The Aggies had a monster win over then-fourth-ranked Idaho last weekend, 28-26. It marked the first victory in Davis program history over a top-5 ranked opponent. The Aggies are that sleeper few expect to win the conference title, partially because Montana State and Montana loom so large. Davis had a close call at Southern Utah three weeks ago, winning 24-21, and that left me wondering if the Aggies were even playoff material. They have played better since then and own the second-longest win streak (four games) in the conference behind Montana State (five games). Portland State, on the other hand, has lost four games in a row. **Speltz:** Aggies 34, Vi-

kings 13. **Gogola:** UC Davis 38, Portland State 21. **Flores:** Davis 31, PSU 17.

Northern Arizona (1-0, 3-2) at Idaho (0-1, 3-2), 3 p.m. TV: ESPN+.

Were the Vandals overrated with their No. 4 ranking prior to last weekend's loss in Davis, California? Probably a little bit. They certainly do not seem to be any better than Montana and I'd pick the Grizzlies to win if they had a game scheduled this year inside Washington-Grizzly Stadium (they do not). Idaho's claim to fame this year is its win at FBS Wyoming last month. But Wyoming is 1-4, so there's that. Northern Arizona is a Big Sky darkhorse. The Lumberjacks stunned then-10th-ranked Sacramento State in the Walkup Skydome last week, and they'll give the Vandals a serious test this Saturday. Expect a close game. I'll give Idaho the nod because the team is used to playing in a dome and has its back against the wall in its quest for league supremacy. **Speltz:** Vandals 28, Lumberjacks 26. **Gogola:** Idaho 31, Northern Arizona 27. **Flores:** Idaho 27, NAU 20.

Idaho State (0-1, 2-3) at Cal Poly (1-0, 2-2), 6 p.m. TV: ESPN+.

This is a clash of much-improved teams. The Bengals trailed highly touted Montana State by just a touchdown early in the fourth quarter last Saturday before the game got away from them in a 37-17 home loss. The Mustangs have built momentum after two blowout losses to FBS teams to start the season. Still, one could argue Cal Poly's two-straight wins don't mean much since they came at the expense of NAIA Western Oregon and winless Northern Colorado. Anyway, I like what I saw out of the Bengals in last Saturday's loss to Montana State. They've got a decent defense and capable offense, which was on full display in a 38-28 home win over Southern Utah two weeks ago. **Speltz:** Bengals 38, Mustangs 28. **Gogola:** Idaho State 34, Cal Poly 17. **Flores:** ISU 35, Cal Poly 21.

Bill Speltz is Missoulian sports editor. Contact him at bill.speltz@406mtsports.com or on Twitter @billspeltz

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Lee

Continued from 3

He had come in as an offensive player but was switched to defense. He still got to contribute on special teams those first couple seasons.

Adapting to the college game was a climb for Lee. He had played 8-Man football for a handful of years while busing between Philipsburg and Drummond for some of the team's practices and games.

He did play 11-Man football his senior year of high school when he transferred to Missoula Sentinel. However, he played only offense there, so moving to defense at UM was his first time playing that side of the ball in 11-Man.

He suited up in all 15 games on defense as a junior at UM and started once. He's started all five games so far this season. Even when the times were tough over the years, his grandfather offered his support more than anything.

"He just tells me to keep my

chin up, keep being me and I'm his favorite player even if I'm never seeing the field," Lee said. "That's kind of how grandpa is. He knows that my dream was to play for the Grizzlies and he'll be there 100% of the way."

Smith is there again this year cheering on his grandson. Lee still looks up to spot him in those same seats.

Whether he's scoring defensive touchdowns or making any sort of play for their mutual favorite team, he's doing so with his biggest fan right there.

"It means the world," he said. "I'm so glad that he's been able to stick around this long. Grandparents get old, and I'm in college, and I'm so thankful to have my grandparents still. It's just awesome that he gets to be there with me. It'd be really different if he wasn't."

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.



BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Montana safety Jaxon Lee (25) runs with the ball after recovering a fumble during the FCS second-round playoff game against Delaware on Dec. 2 at Washington-Grizzly Stadium in Missoula.



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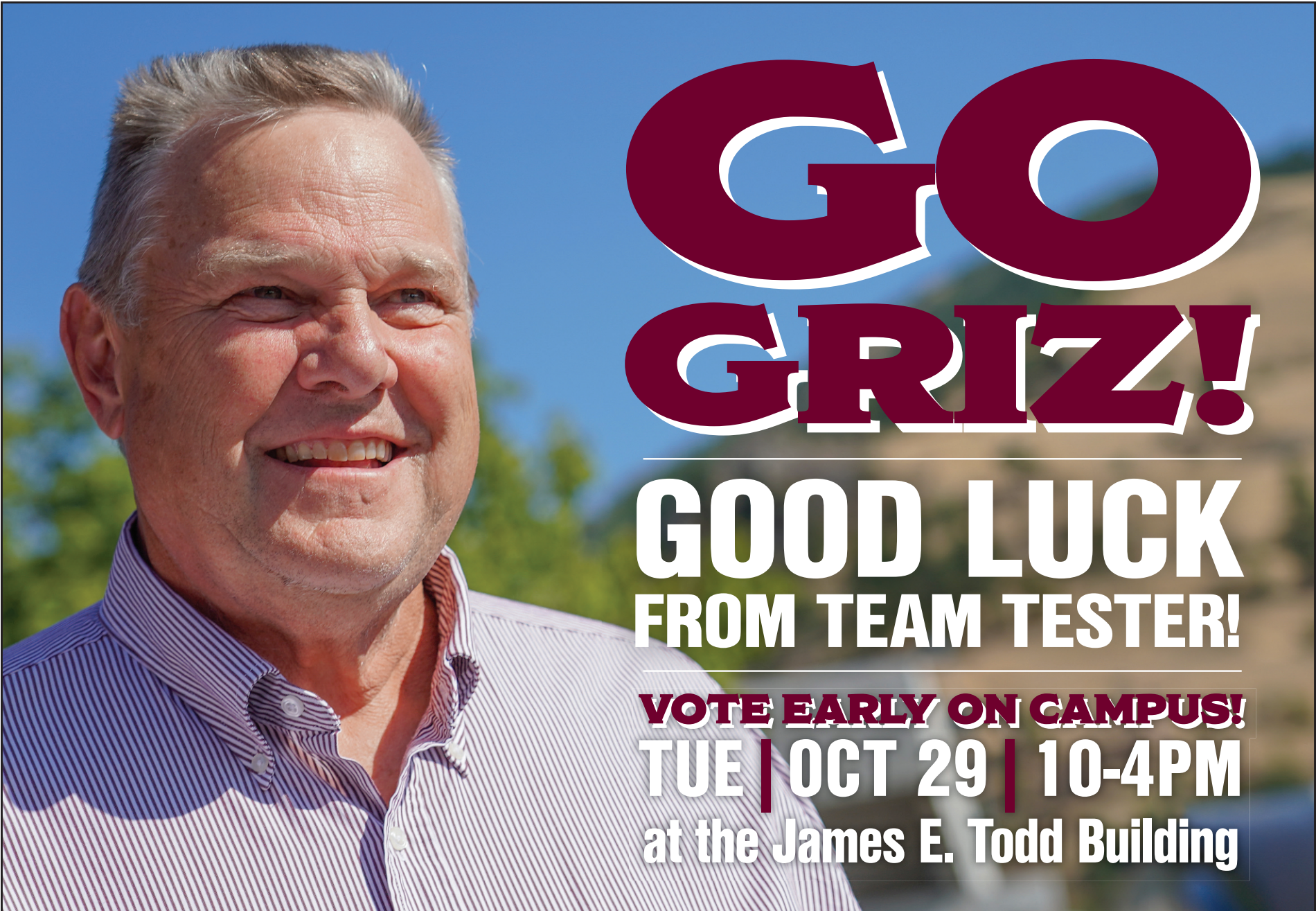


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