



Titans punter Brett Kern graduated from Grand Island High School in 2004 and was named to The News' first-team All-Western New York as a senior in 2003. (Al Bello/Getty Images)

Grand Island coaches join Titans punter Brett Kern at Pro Bowl

By [Dave DeLuca](#) | Published February 17, 2018

The last time Grand Island football coaches Mike Stauffer and Steve Steck watched Brett Kern punt in a helmet and shoulder pads, Kern was a senior at Grand Island High School. Fast forward nearly two decades, they were back together again — only this time, Kern as an NFL Pro Bowler. Kern was able to invite Stauffer and Steck down to Orlando, Fla., to celebrate Kern's first Pro Bowl appearance and enjoy all of the festivities as part of the NFL's "Thank You, Coach" program. The coaches were flown down to Orlando — on the NFL's dime — to attend practices and watch the Pro Bowl on Jan. 28 from a comfy suit at Camping World Stadium.

When Kern got word that he could invite one of his high school coaches and a guest down to Orlando, he texted Grand Island head coach Dean Santorio, Stauffer and Steck, and told them to sort out who was coming down. Since Santorio had prior commitment, Stauffer and Steck gladly hopped on a plane to enjoy the "once in a lifetime experience."

"The NFL kind of wined and dined us for the whole weekend," Stauffer said. "We were able to go down on the field for pregame warmups, then we got honored at the 50-yard line, got a photo with Brett and then watched the national anthem with him on the sideline. The whole experience for us was just unbelievable to be a part of."

Right when Stauffer and Steck got there, they walked into the elevator and wound up rubbing shoulders with Broncos linebacker Von Miller and Rams running back Todd Gurley. "I felt like a little kid," Stauffer said.

Kern said having his former coaches down there "meant a lot to him." To bring things full circle, Stauffer and Steck were the ones in his ear always telling him he should give football a shot someday. That someday came in the summer of Kern's sophomore year. Kern, an elite soccer player in the area, was growing tired of the sport.

"My sophomore year I was really disappointed I didn't make the varsity [soccer] team," Kern said. "I was putting in a lot of time and a lot of effort to play varsity, and to come up short, it was kind of the last straw. Coach Santorio, Coach Stauffer and Coach Steck, ever since I was in 7th-grade gym class, were always telling

me, 'You gotta try football. You gotta try football.' "So that summer, I went for it." That meant telling his father, Cal, one of the best soccer players in Western New York history. Cal was a two-time All-American goalkeeper at SUNY Buffalo State and was picked third overall in the North American Soccer League draft in 1972. "I was a little scared about telling him at first... but he was 100 percent supportive of me," Kern said.

He began punting footballs over his house. As he got older, he moved on to punting over the power lines. "Eventually, I just ran out of room," Kern said. "Me and my dad would have to go down to the football field to put up a few." Kern started making an instant impact on Grand Island, and his coaches knew they struck gold.

"We knew Brett was special as a sophomore, we've just never seen a kid who could kick a ball like that," Steck said. "But even outside of that, was his work ethic. He worked hard in practice, but he did a lot outside of practice, too. He went to camps, worked with kicking coaches, he worked tirelessly to perfect his craft. "By the time he was a senior, it was widely known that he was the best punter to ever punt in the area."

Kern was named first-team All-Western New York and first team All-State. He earned a scholarship to Toledo where he went on to be an All-American as a senior and finished third in the voting for the Ray Guy Award, given annually to the nation's top collegiate punter. He was named the MAC's Special Teams Player of the Year.

He was signed by the Denver Broncos as an undrafted free agent in 2008. In his second season, he was released by the Broncos but quickly scooped up by Tennessee, where he's now spent the last nine seasons. He's now the franchise's all-time leader in gross punting average and net punting average and ranks second in career punts.

Even with a resume like that, Kern was still waiting for his first Pro Bowl nod. He finally made the AFC Pro Bowl team this year after having the best season of his 10-year career and leading the NFL in both in punting average (49.7) and net average (44.6). "It was a huge honor to be selected to the Pro Bowl and represent the AFC and the Titans," Kern said. "It was one of my goals when I got into the league."

He came oh-so-close to breaking the 77-year-old NFL record for punting average set all the way back in 1940 by Washington's Sammy Baugh. His punting average ranked second all-time and his gross average ranked eighth all-time in the NFL.

Steelers coach Mike Tomlin, the AFC coach, was joking around with Kern that even though he made the Pro Bowl for punting, he shouldn't expect to be doing much of it in Orlando. "Coach Tomlin was joking around with me on Wednesday and he was just saying, 'You're not going to punt,' Kern recalled. "I laughed about it."

Lo and behold, Tomlin was serious: Kern didn't punt once. His only action came holding three extra points and a field goal. "We had two 4th downs in a row, and Coach Tomlin just looked at me and said, 'Hey, I wasn't kidding man. You're not going to punt today,' " Kern said.

It didn't matter to Stauffer and Steck – just seeing him on the sideline was enough. "It was kind surreal knowing that this a kid you knew back when he was 14- or 15-years-old and now here we are watching him in the Pro Bowl as one of the best punters in the league right now," Steck said. "It was an incredible weekend for us to be a part of it."