

WHERE ARE THEY NOW

BY CLAY HENRY

PHOTO BY STATON BREIDENTHAL

Matt Wait was Arkansas' punter from 1994-97. He was a star running back at Lake Hamilton High School but was recruited by the Razorbacks primarily to punt.

WAIT FOR IT

FORMER PUNTER, RUNNING BACK MATT WAIT ALWAYS SHINES WITH MULTIPLE TALENTS

Grant Garrett had a great excuse when asked a question about his high school teammate's abilities.

"I don't really know how good of a punter Matt Wait was in high school," Garrett said. "To be honest, we hardly ever punted."

That's not exactly what Garrett's parents would say when the boys were in their presence. They watched the punter closely in warm-ups and didn't mind proclaiming Wait a deluxe punter.

"My mom and dad always said one of the highlights each week was watching Matt in warm-ups," Garrett said. "They said Matt would punt it 70 to 80 yards with lots of hang time."

Wait was the Arkansas punter from 1994-97. That's after a sterling high school career at Lake Hamilton when he was the bell cow tailback for coach Jerry Clay's juggernaut offense led by Garrett, who, like Wait, was an All-Stater. Garrett was the fulltime starter at center for the Hogs from 1996-98 and a team captain as a senior.

Lake Hamilton went undefeated in Wait's senior season to win the state title. Garrett was a junior.

Wait was headed to Arkansas Tech to play fullback when Arkansas decided to offer a full scholarship, double the Tech offer, as a two-way player, punter and running back.

That was Year 2 of the Danny Ford era. In an unusual twist of roles, Ford ran special teams and most certainly was in charge of punters and kickers.

"Coach Ford was my coach," Wait said. "Honestly, he didn't coach technique. He was just in charge of psychology with the kickers.

"Coach Ford was fun and just a little different. I thought the mental side of punting Coach Ford gave me was beneficial.

"What he did was perfect for me. Coach Ford used negativity to motivate. That always worked for me. I understood and responded to that. I always did. You say I couldn't do something, that motivated me to do it."

Clay taught Wait to punt in high school, but he was basically on his own. The starting running back doesn't get a lot of practice time as the punter anyway.

There was some fine tuning in college thanks to some connections Arkansas quarterbacks coach Joe Ferguson had from his long NFL career with the Buffalo Bills.

"Coach Ferguson hooked me up with Chris Mohr," Wait said. "He'd punted a long time with the Bills. I went to some of his camps in Alabama and he totally changed my technique. He definitely shortened my steps.

"It's funny, he'd watch my games and

send me a text on things to fix. He was a great mentor for me, just huge."

Wait's time at Arkansas coincided with the Razorbacks' move to the SEC. It was clearly a rebuild, and it took place in quick fashion. The Hogs won the SEC West in 1995 with an offense led by senior Barry Lunney and redshirt freshman Anthony Lucas.

Wait was solid as a rock all four seasons. His net was always among the league's best because he always went for hang time instead of distance. There were some records set along the way.

Wait ranks third on the SEC career list for most yards, behind two Vandy punters. His 10,177 yards (for a career 40.5 average) is tops on the Arkansas program list. He tops the list with 251 career punts. He is first and tied second for number of punts in a season with 70 and 69, respectively, in 1997 and 1996.

"Never once in high school did I think I was going to be a college punter," Wait said. "I had signed to play at Arkansas Tech as a running back. I was probably going to be an I-formation fullback."

That all changed when Arkansas recruiter Louis Campbell came for a visit at Lake Hamilton.

"Arkansas said I could do both and they really wanted me as a punter," Wait said. "I had grown up as a Razorback fan and so it wasn't a hard decision.

"Then, once we started practicing that first fall, it was clear they wanted me to just punt," he said. "I was on the scout team [at running back] and Coach Ford didn't like that. He said if I got hurt in practice, we wouldn't have a punter.

"Anyway, I didn't fit what we were doing. I was really more of a fullback. We were in a one-back set with a speed back, Oscar Malone. That wasn't what I could do, help at fullback."

When it was clear that he was only going to punt, his old buddy Garrett gave him grief.

"Oh, yes, he did," Wait said. "A lot of the guys on the team – and Grant was sure one of them – would point to us over on the side working on our craft and say we were not real football players."

Of course, Garrett knew better. He knows Wait is in the Lake Hamilton sports hall of fame for his play at running back, not punter.

"Grant was our best athlete at Lake Hamilton and was just super natural at anything he tried to do," Garrett said. "He was lean, big, powerfully built in the lower body, and fast. It took a lot of people to bring him down.

"No doubt, Matt was one of the top four or five athletes in all of Arkansas. One thing I'll say, don't get him mad. Crossett did that and they paid."

Lake Hamilton beat Crossett in triple overtime on the way to the state title.

"Something happened in the bottom of a pile late in the game," Garrett said. "They punched Matt or gouged him and he went on a rampage. He was running over two or three of them every play and we went right in for the winning touchdown.

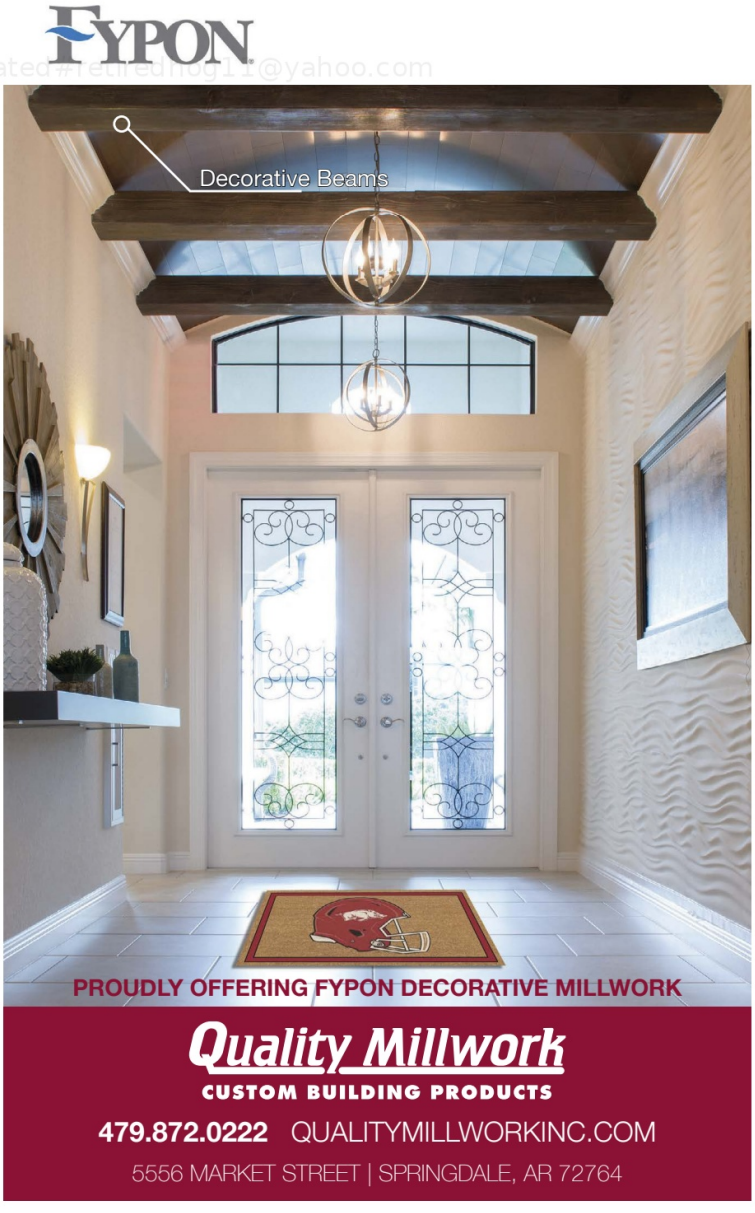
"Matt became like the Hulk. Don't get him mad. He turned into the Hulk against Crossett."

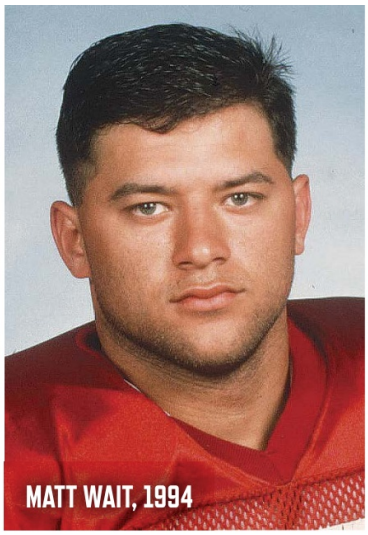
Wait is proud of his athletic ability and accomplishments, but insists he wasn't the best athlete from his own family. He defers to younger sister Tiffany.

"She is the better athlete," Matt said. "She played [basketball] at Kentucky and then for three years in the WNBA at Orlando."

Matt got some tryouts in the NFL as an undrafted free agent. Houston Nutt, Ford's replacement, called Jerry Jones to get Wait a look from the Dallas Cowboys.

"Danny Ford thought I was going to





on the field. It was in Little Rock and I recall looking in the stands and realizing how many people were watching.

"Then, I remember my last punt. We were playing Mississippi State and we had the lead. When we got the ball back with not much time left and needed to punt, Coach Campbell grabbed me as I headed onto the field."

It was a simple thought. Campbell told Wait, "Just make them fair catch it – no returns."

Wait did not follow instructions.

"You have heard about outkicking your coverage?" Wait said. "That's what I did. It went straight up and kept going. It was a huge punt. It went 73 yards and was downed at the 2-yard line.

"Then, in the locker room I got the game ball."

Now the thrill is handing the keys to a new custom home to a client.

"It's rewarding," Wait said. "It's something tangible. You see the fruits of your hard work."

Wait once did much of the work.

"I could put in floors, dry wall, trim and some of the framing," he said. "I did painting, too. But I found that when I did those things, it didn't really make us more money.

"If I had it to do over again, I would have majored in architecture. I can draw plans. I do understand concepts. My dad and grandfather taught me that.

"I had one of my friends ask me 20 years ago why I didn't build homes for a living since I was good at it.

"I feel fortunate that I have had two careers that have gone pretty well. I really enjoy what I'm doing now."

It's sort of like when the running back finally figured out punting was his ticket to Division I football.

