



SPORTS

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

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Campbellville's Vanderjagt is eager for kick-off of upcoming NFL season

By ROD JERRED

Special to The Champion

It's easy to spot Mike Vanderjagt's home from the rest of his neighbours in the rural village of Campbellville. The place-kicker for the Indianapolis Colts of the NFL has the football uprights in his backyard.

And during this offseason when he's not spending time at home with his wife Janalyn and their two-year-old son Jay Michael, Vanderjagt spends a lot of time kicking footballs through those uprights.

A graduate of White Oaks Secondary School (WOSS), Vanderjagt is eager for the NFL season to start in September so he can wipe out the bitter memory of last year's 23-17 loss to the Miami Dolphins in the AFC wildcard playoff game.

The loss ended what had been a near perfect season for Vanderjagt, his third — and best — with the Colts since leaving the Toronto Argonauts of the CFL.

Miss still haunts him

In the regular season Vanderjagt had made 25 of 27 field goal attempts and had converted all 46 extra point attempts.

But in his last play of the year, with the game on line in overtime in the playoffs, Vanderjagt missed from 49 yards out. Wide right. The would-be hero went back to the bench, helplessly watching as the Miami Dolphins, on the very next series, punched it into the end zone for the 23-17 win in the AFC wildcard game.

It didn't matter that earlier in the game, Vanderjagt had kept his team in the game with three successful field goals from 50, 32 and 26 yards out. All that mattered was one miss.

More than six months after that fateful miss, the memory still bothers Vanderjagt.

Prior to the recent Bell Celebrity Golf Classic at Rattlesnake Golf Club, he shook his head when asked about "the miss," and lamented, "They say you're only as good as your last kick."

It has remained with him during the off season, but he's trying to turn it around to his advantage.

"I think about it a lot," he said. "It has fueled my drive during the off season."

It has also left him focused for the coming season. While the Colts finished second in the AFC East with a 10-6 record, Vanderjagt admits some members of the team lost their focus at times during the season.



Photo by BRENT FOSTER

Indianapolis Colts placekicker Mike Vanderjagt relaxes during the NFL off-season, but can't wait to get back onto the football field.

"We have to be focused all 20 games this year," he said.

The mental aspect of the game is important to Vanderjagt, as it is with any placekicker.

"A lot of guys can kick a football 45 yards, but they can't do it when they have to," he said.

A placekicker has a unique position on a football team. He is used sparingly, watching most of the action most of the game. In a game that stresses team play, they're almost solitary outsiders. But when a placekicker is called into a game, the outcome is usually on the line and he's always under the spotlight.

A lineman can miss a blocking assignment and a running back may still break away for a long run; a defensive back can lose his man and still be saved by an errant pass and a quarterback may overthrow his receiver and still be saved by a fantastic catch. Their mistakes can be overlooked

by the fans in the stands, but when a placekicker misses a field goal or an extra point, all eyes are upon him. Once the ball is snapped and held in place by the holder, success or failure rest entirely with the kicker. It's a high-pressure position in a high-pressure league.

"I try to stay as loose as possible," said Vanderjagt, of his mental preparation on the sidelines. And when everything goes right, "I try to enjoy the moment."

Practices in backyard

Physically, Vanderjagt's offseason consists of practice sessions in his backyard, working out with weights and running on the treadmill.

"I do not do a lot of leg exercises," said Vanderjagt. "I don't want to mess with what I've got."

While the Colts training camp starts at the end

of this month, Vanderjagt has already attended two off-season mini-camps, one mandatory and one voluntary. He spent two of three weeks at the voluntary camp.

After five years in the CFL, mostly with the Toronto Argonauts, Vanderjagt attended his first Colts training camp in 1998, along with number one pick in NFL draft, quarterback Peyton Manning. Since then, the Colts have turned a moribund franchise into a solid Superbowl contender fueled by a superpower offence.

However, they've yet to get over the hump of winning their first post-season game.

Vanderjagt wants to end that drought and he probably wouldn't even mind finding himself back in a similar situation as last year — with the game on the line in overtime.

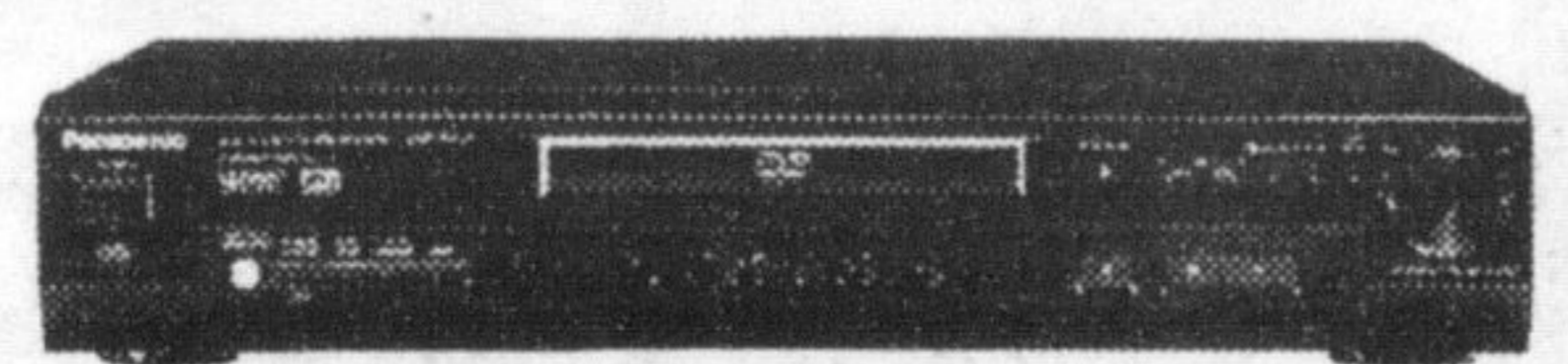
"I didn't enjoy the way last season ended, so I hope to rectify it," said Vanderjagt.

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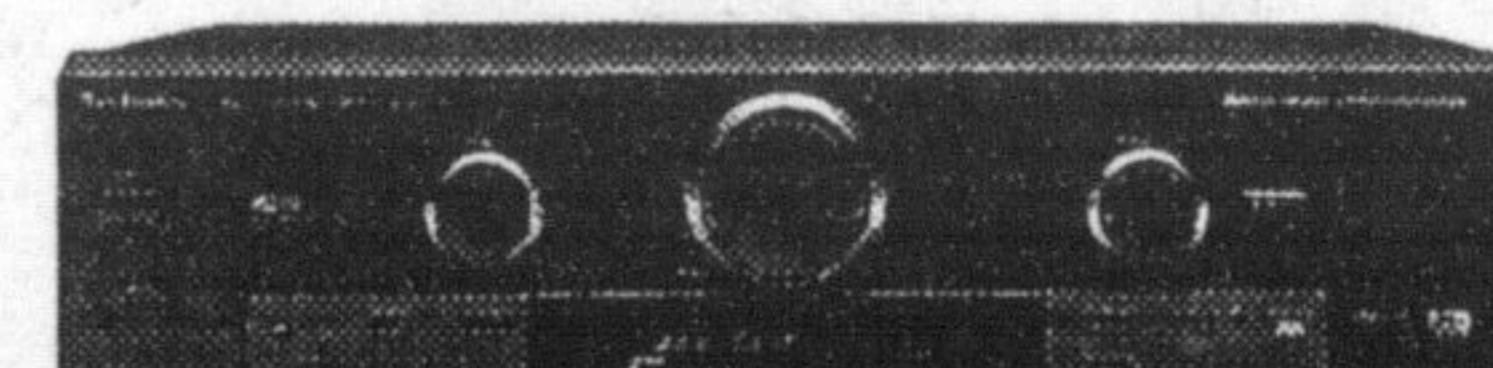
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