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friday **kaimin**

*the weight  
of the matter*



**LIVING LARGER  
THAN LIFE WITH  
MONTANA'S  
OFFENSIVE LINE**

# THE WEIGHT OF THE MATTER

**T**HE SEAT CREAKS AS Dan Kistler Jr. settles in for class. The desk is a one-piece, a wooden chair connected to a wooden desktop, the kind Kistler hates. His body isn't made for them, he says. It's tough to cram a 6-foot-8, 325-pound body into something made for average-sized people.

His legs, clad in XXL-tall sweatpants, bend awkwardly and his knees press against the chair in front of him. His stomach rubs on the desk.

At the front of the class, the professor is recalling an anecdote of a former boyfriend who had size 14 shoes. He had trouble walking down stairs, she says. They used to laugh, she says.

Kistler laughs, too. It's more of a light snicker really. He shakes his head and puts his face in his huge hands.

His shoe size is 16.

Kistler is a student at The University of Montana and plays offensive tackle for the Montana Grizzlies football team. The concept of his position is built on being larger than life, the biggest on the field. He is part of the protective wall around the quarterback and the stronger the wall, the better the protection.

"Ever since I was in high school, the coaches have always said 'You're the bodyguards on the field,'" said Kistler, now preparing for his sophomore season at Montana. "But we don't look at ourselves as 300-pound linemen. We look at ourselves as athletes."

But what happens when a machine, created and fine-tuned for football, leaves the field?

When the season's over, the student part of student-athlete takes control and Kistler and the rest of the line trade in their shoulder pads for backpacks full time. A body constructed for football without the game feels a bit silly, said junior offensive tackle Jon Opperud.

"Being our size can make for some very long classes," said Opperud, who carries just over 305 pounds on his 6-foot-7 frame. "There aren't a whole lot of comfortable chairs for a big man."

He said after 21 years he's accepted that the world feels too small for him. Normal activities can become challenging, like riding in cars — really, any sort of travel — or finding clothes that fit or a bed that suits his body. Living in a dorm with another 300-pound lineman as a freshman was nearly unbearable. But playing the sport he loves makes the tribulations worth it, and to play, he has to be big.

And the bigger the better.

"The bigger guys seem to be more durable, less prone to injury," said Bob Beers Sr., offensive line coach at Montana. "Plus they can push anybody around. The old adage is still 'mass kicks ass.'"

For an O-lineman to succeed, which means keeping an equally massive defensive line from crushing his quarterback and running back, he needs to be a giant like Kistler and Opperud. He needs to be hulking and he needs to be sturdy. The football lineman is the American equivalent of a Japanese Sumo wrestler — an athlete of titanic proportions.

But can a person weigh in at well north of 300 pounds and still be in shape?

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# LIVING LARGER THAN LIFE

## with Montana's offensive line

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“Definitely,” Beers said. “They have the height and the size to carry [300 pounds] and look smooth and good doing it.”

They can outrun most any regular Joe, Beers said. With year-round training programs, linemen are getting bigger, stronger and faster. They have to in order to keep up, Beers said.

But linemen weren't always as massive as they are now, not at the professional level or at The University of Montana. Humans and the game itself are getting larger, Beers said.

Forty years ago, there was just one player in the NFL at the 300-pound mark: a San Diego Charger tackle named Gene Ferguson. The 300-pounders club slowly expanded to three members a decade later. By 1990, nearly 100 players had broken the mark and that number tripled by 2000, according to The Associated Press. When fall training camps began prior to the 2010 season, 532 world-class athletes weighed 300 pounds or more.

“The old adage is still ‘mass kicks ass.’”

Bob Beers Sr., Offensive line coach

And 350 may be the new 300 as 15 NFL-players topped the mark last season, led by Washington Redskins defensive tackle Anthony Bryant, a 6-foot-3, 375-pound behemoth.

This trend extends beyond the professional ranks, though. There was no 300-pound Grizzly prior to Larry Clarkson in 1986 and no more than one on a roster for another decade. In 1995, when the Grizzlies won their first national championship, only one man topped 300 pounds. Conversely, the 2010 team that finished 7-4 and missed the playoffs for the first time since 1992 boasted seven 300-pounders.

“Now it's pretty normal,” Beers said. “There's more emphasis on training at a younger age so (they're) bigger by the time (they're) out of high school.

“We're just recruiting bigger kids. But they're more athletic. They're more athletic than they've ever been. We get a lot of film on kids that are 6-foot-7, 6-foot-8, but they're rangy. They can move.”

The strength training at the college level is leaps ahead of where it was during Beers' first stint as Montana O-line coach from 1986 to 1990, he said, and light years beyond where it was when he earned All-American honors as a linebacker for the Griz in 1967 and 1968.

The young men now load themselves with protein throughout the day in preparation for workouts, from massive steak dinners to twice-a-day protein shakes.

“The most protein we ever got was in a Budweiser,” Beers joked.

All this helps certain high school recruits turn into monster O-lineman at the collegiate level. Not everyone's build can carry that much mass.

“When you recruit a kid, you've got to look at his frame,” Beers said. “Can he put on the kind of weight that we're going to ask him to?”

TUESDAY NIGHTS ARE ALL-YOU-CAN-EAT chicken wings at Hooters and a staple of being a Montana lineman. During the season, the restaurant becomes a weekly hotspot for the biggest Grizzlies to gorge. An average night shapes up as 60 wings a person or more.

Some nights get heavier — like when senior lineman Stephen Sabin packed away 100 wings in one sitting, then a restaurant record. Others, like one evening in February, look a bit lighter.



Sabin, who currently weighs 300 pounds flat, sits with Opperud, junior Jake Hendrickson (292) and freshman Brett Brauer (260) at a table piled high with stripped chicken bones. In the offseason, Brauer says he likes to stop at 40 wings, but as he announces his decision, his teammates chime in.

“If you're going to do 40, you might as well do 50,” Opperud says.

“And if you do 50, why not 60?” Sabin says.

It's all in playing the part of a lineman, Sabin said, of packing on pounds and keeping them there.

The 6-foot-4 Sabin usually eats five smaller meals a day during the peak of the football season. “Smaller” has a different context to guys like Sabin, and a small dinner recently consisted of three or four salmon melt sandwiches. Still, he tries to take it easy when football isn't in season.

“During the season, I eat more because I lose weight during practice,” Sabin said. “It's funny because during the season, you're tired from all the work and you don't want to eat as much but you have to stay big. During the offseason, when you want to eat, you've got to watch it.”

Transitioning away from the football lifestyle can be tough for men used to eating 4,000 calories a day. Sabin's ballooned as high as 333 pounds in an offseason, but working with trainers at UM helps keep him slim — at least relatively.

But when the games are finished, the eating habits of the O-line sometimes linger on, said JC Weida, an athletic trainer



for Montana's sports teams. He said sometimes when order-barking coaches disappear, players, not just the biggest ones, can begin to lose control of their weights. That's why he and the other trainers at the Rhinehart Athletic Training Center offer to meet with graduating athletes to counsel them on staying fit. For linemen, this means pulling back on the calories and keeping up with the cardio. A 300-pound body is not a healthy type, Weida said, and staying that size beyond its necessity can have long lasting health issues.

“They're not really fit individuals,” Weida said, adding that there just because they are athletic and can play the sport, doesn't mean they're healthy. “They don't

have the longevity; the body wears down.”

The weight can affect the heart, lungs, body joints and lead to a higher risk of heart disease, diabetes and stroke along with high blood pressure and cholesterol. “Everything across the board,” Weida said.

Studies by sources like The Associated Press and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health all showed higher mortality rates among former linemen that continue to carry the weight than the general public.

Because of all this, the sooner players can trim down following their final snaps, the better, Weida said. Something at least one Grizzly, former offensive guard Frank Garrett, embodied.

Garrett once tipped the scales at more than 280 pounds, but after graduating in 1994, he said he started slimming almost immediately. The Missoula native, who now teaches physical education at Salmon High School in Salmon, Idaho, was once an outdoor enthusiast before beefing up for football. He missed skiing and kayaking — unthinkable activities for a bulky body.

“Being a football body size is not conducive of doing much other than playing football,” Garrett said. “The next day (after the final season ended) I cut my eating back to normal-people proportions and just started working out. For football, you kind of have to put everything else on hold. It consumes you for five years (at the college level).”

The former lineman's weight now hovers around 200 pounds, a shadow of his football-playing self. He said he's amazed when he looks at the players of today, men who move and run as

well as he can now but with 50 percent more of his mass. “I'd have been absolutely dwarfed,” he said.

“At what point do we become too massive and too strong?” Garrett said. “I think that negative return is that these guys are almost going to be too athletic. The game is so fast and with the collisions, we're talking about head injuries. And that's pretty scary.”

Cutting weight hasn't been as easy for all former athletes; just ask Eric Simonson. A 290-pound All-American left tackle for the Grizzlies as a senior in 1995, he packed on 70 pounds after leaving the game. Nutritional exit-interviews for players were still years away, and without the structure, Simonson lost control of his weight.

“Old habits die hard, the habit of consuming so many calories,” said Simonson, now a rancher and farmer in Plentywood. “It was normal to go to a restaurant and order two entrees.”

After a few years, and lots of work, the third-generation rancher has shrunk to about 300 pounds, a more comfortable weight for his 6-foot-5 frame. He still climbs on the treadmill “once in a while” and hopes to drop even lower.

Still, Simonson may be the lucky kind, he said, because he can still run on a treadmill if he wants. Serious knee, back and hip issues badger plenty of former players after years of contact sports at such a high mass. It keeps them from being active, Simonson said, which can keep them heavy.

EACH MORNING, KISTLER visits the athlete weight room in the Adams Center for his daily workouts. He says hitting the gym on a very regular basis is something that won't change even after the games are over. He won't be one of those guys whose bodies inflate in their post-playing days.

“If I don't work out every day, I just don't feel very good,” Kistler said. “I feel lazy.”

Even if a football career doesn't pan out, Kistler expects to have a very active profession, one that will fit an athletic body. The sociology major already has an eye on life after the game, maybe working in the police force. Maybe even with the Secret Service, he said.

“I don't see myself working behind a desk,” Kistler said.

To do that, he'd have to find one that would fit him.

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ABOVE Stephen Sabin reacts to a comment from one of his teammates. Sabin ate 50 wings on Tuesday night, but this past season ate 100 in one sitting, taking three hours to complete the feat.

TOP CENTER Jake Hendrickson and Stephen Sabin eat all-you-can-eat wings at Hooters on Tuesday night.

BOTTOM CENTER The bone pile sits on the table after the guys are done eating. A total of 180 wings were eaten between the four linemen on Tuesday night.