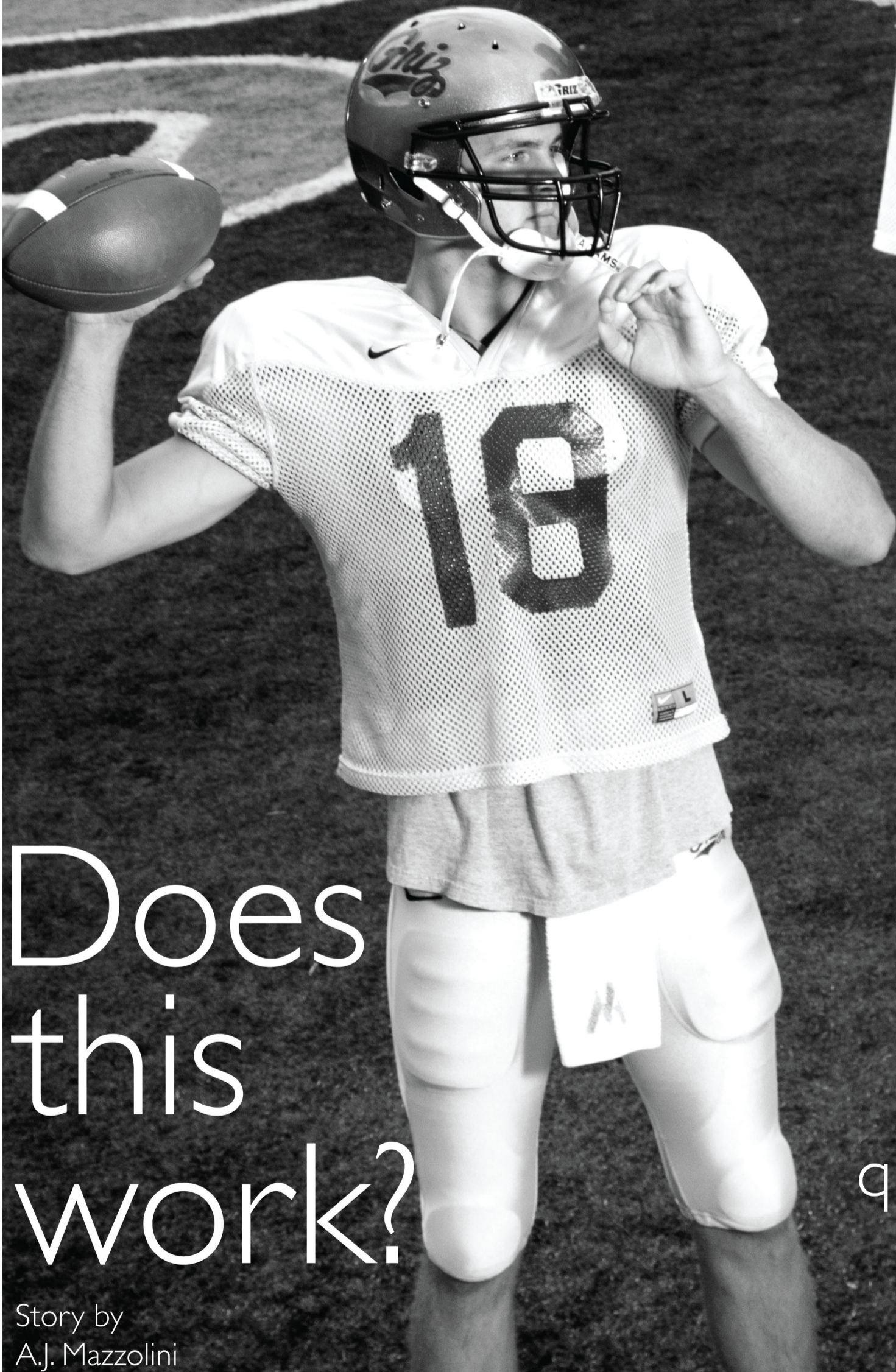


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## Does this work?

**6-7**  
Life inside  
a dual  
quarterback  
system

Story by  
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Photo by  
Alisia Duganz



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# Leader(s) of the charge

by A.J. Mazzolini



**T**HE QUARTERBACK is the natural leader on the football field. He's the man guiding every play, making the decisions and distributing the ball.

The passer is like a coach on the gridiron, looked to for direction by all players.

But

what happens when there are two of them?

The quarterback carousel has been a topic of conversation for Montana football for most of the last two seasons with seniors Andrew Selle and Justin Roper both suiting at the position.

Selle, a Billings native and starter for the second half of last season, rose to the ranks of team captain this season. The honor came paired with a spot on the Walter Payton Award watch list, a spotlight of the best offensive players in the Football Championship Subdivision. But even that doesn't mean the Griz are a solo quarterback project.

Roper, originally from Buford, Ga., is in his second year at Montana after transferring from the University of Oregon. While he was relegated to backup after missing time with a concussion last year, the quarterback position is wide open again.

And the passers have taken their continued sharing of duties in stride.

"It's kind of nice knowing if one of us isn't having the greatest game, the other guy can step in and get the job done," Selle said. "When there's only one guy, and he's messing things up, you don't really have any options."

Through three games, Selle isn't quite messing things up, but he's been far less pristine than in 2009. The starter's completion percentage has dropped off 10 percent — from 63 percent to 53 percent — and he has more interceptions (five) than touchdowns (four).

For now, Montana head coach Robin Pflugrad said Selle remains the starter. Despite the lackluster numbers, Pflugrad said Selle's leadership and poise in the huddle and on the sidelines make him a crucial piece of each game.

Having a rather inexperienced line and young receiving corps, Pflugrad said a sturdy and centered quarterback who knows the ins and outs of the program is important to a growing offense.

"[Selle] has been here for five seasons and been around the block with the Grizzlies," Pflugrad said, "and he did a great job last year, so we're trying to really settle him down earlier in the game and make some calls that will make him get off to a better start."

Pflugrad's confidence in Selle as a starter leaves Roper in the backup role. Even though he has far superior numbers—enough to rank him in the top tier in passing efficiency in the nation—Roper said playing second doesn't bother him.

"The key to any player on the team is accepting your role," Roper said, "and [Selle] was voted team captain, which is great because we need that in a quarterback position. So my role is to help him and help the team however best I can. If it's on the sidelines cheering him on or giving him information

# Montana's quarterbacks face challenges of a two QB system

that I see, then that's what I have to do."

The two have generated a relationship on the field as well as on the bench. They work together to see eye to eye, despite the fact that the 6-foot-6 Roper towers over his 6-foot-2 counterpart. Roper said pairing the two seniors together has benefited the team, giving them another set of eyes on the sidelines.

The quarterback who's out of the action acts as a coach, he said, and adds a new perspective to what's going on in the field of play. "It's really helped us with our game plan," Roper said.

Since Roper's arrival in Montana more than a year ago, the passers have learned to tell when the other has found a groove. When the game quarterback gets into the zone, Roper said, they both know to ride it out.

"We're both very smart players, and we can understand when the team is in a rhythm and how not to disrupt that," he said. "Andrew got in a pretty good rhythm in the third quarter last game [against Eastern Washington], and he played the rest of the game, and I'm not one to disrupt that."

After a Selle-piloted first quarter saw three drives stall for two punts and an interception, Selle picked up the pace later in the game, throwing a touchdown and nearly mounting a comeback in an eventual 36-27 loss. Seeing Selle get hot in the passing pocket, Roper sat for most of the game with only two pass attempts.

Roper did take the last snap of the game, a fumble that the Eagles took back for a touchdown. The quarterback had been on the sidelines for so long, he said he lost step when it came to regaining game speed.

"Going in when you haven't played in a while, you're kind of cold," Roper said. "And getting in that rhythm, that's really hard for me."

"If it's a long time since you've been on that field, you basically have to almost warm up and go through that whole process again," Selle added. "It always feels like it's forever on the sidelines, and sometimes it feels like it's so quick when you're actually playing."

To stay centered, Selle said he runs through each play in his head as it's happening on the field. Staying disciplined and glued to the action is key. "You can't just check out of the game when you come out," Selle said.

But nothing compares to reps in the face of a live defense, he said.

The rhythm of the game is a funny thing, Selle added. Sometimes, it takes several snaps to get a good feel for things again, and other times, the pulse of the game never left.

Coach Pflugrad acknowledges the occasional stall in rhythm, but having two competent throwers puts Montana a shelf above most other teams. He said the positives of overlapping talent far outweigh any negativity it may bring.

"Within the system and the physicality of the Big Sky Conference, I think you're going to have to have a couple quarterbacks ready to go," Pflugrad said.

But what effect does the constant switching in the backfield have on the rest of the offense?

It's a conversation the man working closest to both Selle and Roper, senior center Alex Verlanic, wants no part of. Verlanic and the rest of the quarterback protectors on the offensive line have taken a vow of silence until they start producing better results.

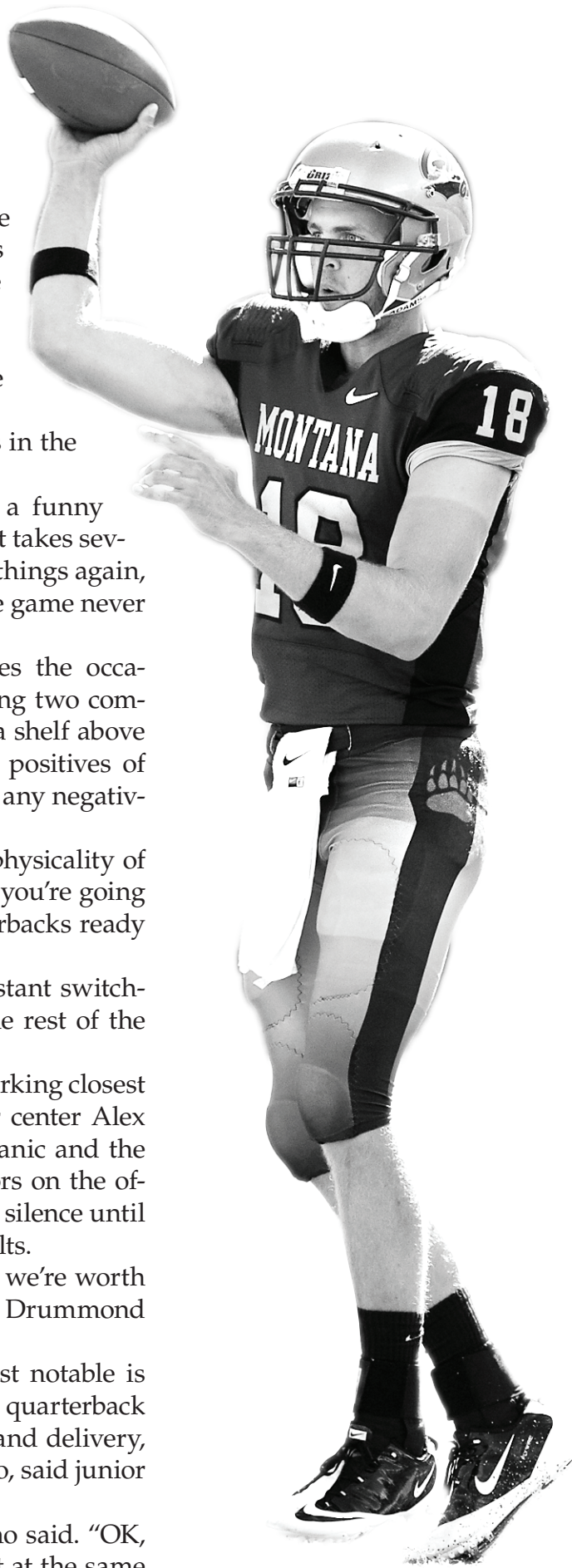
"We can't talk until we show we're worth something," the center from Drummond said.

But where the change is most notable is for skill position players. Each quarterback has his own feel in the pocket and delivery, which receivers need to adjust to, said junior receiver Jabin Sambrano.

"No, we don't care," Sambrano said. "OK, let's be honest. Yes, we care. But at the same time, we're all in this together.... All that matters is the win."

And Selle agreed. Both he and Roper are set on doing everything in their power if it helps the team snap out of its losing streak.

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Greg Lindstrom/Montana Kaimin  
Justin Roper

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