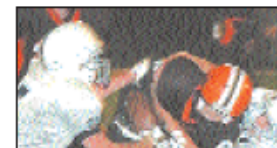




Sports



Mavericks' Rodgers provides special spark

Minnesota State's Kelvin Rodgers (2) looks for running room during a punt return against Peru State at Blakeslee Stadium.



Pat Christman

Minnesota State returner one of fastest men on field

By Chad Courrier
Free Press Staff Writer

MANKATO — The first kick-off return didn't go too well, so Kelvin Rodgers talked with some of his blockers. On the second, he said, the wedge worked perfectly, knocking a hole in the wave of oncoming Northern Iowa tacklers.

Soon, there were just three defenders with a chance to make the tackle, so Rodgers cut

back. Now even, the fastest man was going to win.

Ninety-nine yards later, Rodgers won.

"I like getting the crowd going," Rodgers said. "After games, people tell me they're looking for a show. The crowd loves a kick return."

Rodgers, a sophomore cornerback, will be one of the fastest players on the field tonight as Minnesota State hosts Augustana in the North

Central Conference opener at Blakeslee Stadium. Kickoff is scheduled for 7 p.m.

"He's got a tremendous amount of talent, very explosive," coach Jeff Jamrog said. "God blessed him with a great deal of speed. He's a dangerous weapon."

Rodgers' career didn't start too quickly at Minnesota State. As a freshman, he injured his shoulder early at fall practice, but because classes hadn't started, he returned home to East St. Louis, Ill., not having used up any eligibility.

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RODGERS: Played in all 11 games in 2006

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He returned for the spring semester to participate in off-season practices.

"It was tough," he said. "That was the first time I'd ever taken a football season off. I kept calling the coaches, trying to keep track of what was going on."

Last season, Rodgers played in all 11 games as a backup cornerback and on special teams. He made a big splash during the indoor and outdoor track seasons, winning the 200-meter dash

at the NCC indoor meet and placing second in the 100-meter dash at the NCC outdoor meet. He said his fastest time in the 100 is 10.4 seconds and 200 is 21.4 seconds, but he claims he could go faster if he trained more in track.

"I use track to keep me going in the offseason," Rodgers said. "I try to stay in shape and get ready for football."

This season, Rodgers has come close to breaking a couple of returns, finally getting that 99-yarder against

Northern Iowa. He's averaging 18.7 yards on punt returns and 36.2 yards on kick returns.

Jamrog said Northern Iowa, a stronger program, showed respect by "pooching" its kickoffs so that Rodgers couldn't get a return.

"You credit 10 guys for what they do blocking," Jamrog said.

"But what you do the last 65 yards separates the good returners from the great ones. He's an athlete that makes plays. He could be one of our best receivers."

That brings another dimension to his talent. A receiver in high school, he caught a touchdown in the Mavericks' spring game in March. Maybe sometime this season, he'll show up on the Minnesota State offense, though he's not about to give up his spot at cornerback, where he's made nine tackles and one interception.

"At corner, you get to run all over the field and make tackles and fumbles and interceptions," Rodgers said. "At receiver, sometimes you're not in on the play."