

Dowler Brothers Double 'Cats Prospects for Championship

BY PAUL BURNS

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~ COACH BRENT VIGEN

Raise your hand if you knew Taco Dowler has a brother who also plays football for Montana State. Of course, you knew that. You probably also knew they were twins. But you're an exception. Plenty of Bobcat fans are unaware of Caden Dowler's presence on the team, mainly because Taco had such an outstanding season in 2022.

"I don't seek the glory. That's not mine to have," Caden says. That could change this season, as Caden is expected to fill a big role on defense. Last season Ty Okada, who is currently trying to make it in the NFL with the Seattle Seahawks, roamed the Bobcats' defensive backfield from his nickel position. All Caden has to do this year is make people forget Ty. If he's successful at that task, there's a good chance he may become as much of a household name as Taco.

And Taco is indeed a household name. Of course, having a catchy



name like Taco doesn't hurt. He was only two years old when he dropped McLean as a first name, the surname his mother was born with. But he's more than a meal. Last fall, all he did was lead all FCS in yards per punt return and in punt returns for touchdowns. Amazingly, he did not receive any post season honors from the Big Sky Conference coaches. The league's first-team punt returner averaged less than 14 yards a return and scored one touchdown. Taco averaged 18 yards a return and scored two touchdowns. He was ignored for the second team, third team and honorable mention as well.

"A lot of my success was set up by a lot of stuff I didn't do," Taco explains. "I worked hard, but those two touchdowns, all I did was run. I caught the ball and ran. I didn't do anything special." His first score came on a 67-yard return against Morehead State, and his second went for 79 yards in the playoffs against William & Mary. "We practice punt returns a lot. It helps just seeing where my teammates are going to set up their blocks. I just saw it before it actually happened."

Against William & Mary, one of those teammates opening the field for Taco's return was Caden. That was one of two games that Caden remembers the most fondly. The other one? Beating the Grizzlies, of course. Coach Brent Vigen mentioned Caden a few times in the offseason as a player who greatly improved as last season went on, and who is expected to be a key defender this season, although Caden is expected to battle Level Price and Aidan Parks for playing time this fall. Getting both Dowlers to MSU was no different than recruiting a pair of high school teammates, Vigen says. "I haven't had a lot of experience with twins," he says. "You have to

recruit them independently, and we did that. They're going to have a big impact moving forward."

As seniors at Billings West in the fall of 2021, the pair attended the annual Gold Rush game, where nearly every fan in the stands wears a gold-colored shirt. It's always MSU's home opener and the place gets pretty loud and electric even before the opening kickoff. "We saw the culture; we saw the atmosphere. We looked at each other in the stands and just decided, yeah, we're coming here," Taco recalls. "We didn't want to go where we'd necessarily play right away; we wanted to come in and compete for a spot and just win."

Both Dowlers expected to redshirt last season, but Taco was on the field right away, while Caden played in eight games. The pair have always been teammates in any sport they've played. "Through recruiting, the biggest thing for both of us was going where we would succeed," Taco explains. "If that ends up being together, then that ends up being together. If

not, then we'd see each other on holidays." It may turn out to be a blessing that Taco played as a true freshman. Near the end of this past spring practice, he dislocated his shoulder, and his status for this season is still unknown, meaning he might redshirt in 2023.

Caden is one minute older, two inches taller and about 35 pounds heavier. Still, Taco received most of the publicity coming out of high school. He was the state's Gatorade Player of the Year and set numerous Billings West receiving records. Between the two, there's more brotherly love than Philadelphia. "We're best friends outside of football," Caden says. "I don't think many people would guess we're twins. They usually think I'm the older, or they just call me Taco." Caden does acknowledge Taco's athleticism. "He's always been ahead of me, and he's always performed really well, and he does his job. I'm his biggest fan."

So, what's Taco got that Caden doesn't? "My speed has always been a pretty good strength in



my game,” Taco explains. Prior to his shoulder injury, he dedicated the offseason to putting on more weight and learning the playbook better. As a true freshman, he gradually understood the offense, which helped him connect with quarterback Tommy Mellott, particularly in the 2022 game at Northern Arizona. Deep in his own territory, on third down with less than a minute to play, Mellott scrambled for five full seconds, an eternity by any standard. He rolled to his right, avoiding the NAU defense, giving Taco time to work his way downfield, where he finally got behind the NAU secondary. Falling out of bounds, Tommy flung the ball downfield; Taco caught it over his right shoulder for a 64-yard gain.

“When he and I are clicking, it’s like the NAU game where he can break the pocket and make plays; just find people deep and throw it.

That’s where our connection is,” Taco says. “Trusting each other is the big thing.” Seconds after making the connection, Blake Glessner kicked the winning field goal as time ran out in the Bobcats 41-38 win. “Taco’s best when he can just play,” Caden says with admiration and sincerity. “I wasn’t surprised at all. I was excited, but not really surprised. Taco, he’s an athlete.”

Looking beyond their playing days at MSU, both brothers think they want to get into finance, specifically managing other people’s money. It’s great work if you can get it, but these two have always been willing to go after what they want. “He’s a lot different than me,” Caden says of Taco, “but we’re similar in that we work hard.”

Flipping the script, what does Caden have that Taco doesn’t? While both have movie star looks,

Caden possesses a million dollar smile that should help in his future plans of bringing in the dough. Taco claims he picked finance as a major before Caden did. “He’s a copier,” Taco says in jest.

OK, Taco, your brother has to have some pretty strong attributes. After all, not everyone can replace an NFL prospect like Okada. It turns out the younger Dowler can dish the praise as well. “He’s a stud,” Taco says off the top of his head. And then he offers more thought. “The biggest thing for him is his confidence. He’s big and strong, he understands the defense, he should be proud of himself.” Then he really starts laying it on. “He’s literally perfect. I’m not perfect at all. He’s a little bit better than me at just about everything.” Wait, is that too much? Apparently. “I’m quicker though,” Taco finishes with his own \$900,000 smile.

A season ago, when Caden played safety, he mostly roamed the defensive backfield. Now, as the nickelback, he’s moved closer to the line of scrimmage and has occasional one-on-one duties with the slot receiver. Occasionally, in practice, that slot receiver is Taco. “I don’t like going against him,” Taco says of those matchups. “Sometimes in practice it gets chippy,” Caden admits. “If I’m covering him and I grab his hip, he’ll swat it away and we might get into it.”

While Taco may have received more accolades in high school, one thing Caden got that Taco didn’t was uniform No. 4 at West High. The number is similar to MSU’s No. 41, and the senior wearing that number is honored by the recognition. At West, it is in recognition of former Bear Michael Guelff, who died in a car crash at the age of 22 in 2009. “He wasn’t the biggest, he wasn’t the fastest, but he loved football. He always



Photo courtesy MSU Athletics

worked his hardest,” Caden says. The coaches decide who gets to wear the coveted jersey each fall. “It was one of the coolest honors, to be a captain and to be No. 4. I knew I had to step up my game in practice and be a leader.” By coincidence, long before Guelff wore that number, Pat Carahasen donned the same jersey for West before he went on to have a good career as a Bobcat starting in 1999.

For now, the brothers aren’t resting on their laurels. If he’s healthy, Taco will probably find the end zone more often than Caden this season. If Caden is doing his job correctly, chances are no one will notice, because it means the opposing offensive player didn’t contribute. But Taco will know when Caden is playing well, just as the rest of us will know when Taco is playing well.



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