

Bills Rely On Special Ops

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Article by: [Mark Gaughan](#)

The Bills were about to face San Diego's No. 1-ranked kickoff return unit, and special teams coach Bobby April wanted to use the words of World War II Gen. George S. Patton to drive home a message.

"It wasn't the main speech at the start of the movie," said Bills defensive end Ryan Denney. "It was a scene after one of the first battles at some pass, and the Americans had failed, and the troops were wiped out. That's when Patton came in and started instilling discipline, and they started focusing on all the details."

The message: The Bills would have to take care of every little assignment against the Chargers. The result: Darren Sproles averaged just 17 yards on four returns, and the Bills controlled the field position.

Movie clips are just one of the creative ways April motivates his players, and the Bills' special teams have been an inspired bunch again this season.

Solid special teams have helped the Bills to a 5-1 start. The Bills hope special teams can set a winning tone again today when they face the Miami Dolphins.

Miami has struggled in kickoff coverage and punt coverage, ranking tied for 31st and 30th, respectively, in those categories. The Bills would love to repeat last year's special teams success in Miami, when a 40-yard punt return by Roscoe Parrish set up Buffalo's winning score.

Uncommon esprit de corps has been a hallmark of April's tenure as Bills special teams chief the past five years.

"Special teams really are something special here," said Bills safety Bryan Scott. "Coach April finds a way to inspire guys to want to be great. We're really held to a high standard. You don't want to let the team down and yourself down. But you really don't want to let coach April down."

Ever since he came to the Bills in 2004, April has given each one of his units its own special identity by way of a military label. They are:

- **Seals** — The kickoff return unit. The Navy Seals often have to go find their mission in order to complete it. Kickoff returns are similar. "It's not like a line of scrimmage, and the ball's going to start right here," April says. "You have to go find the place to start. You have to go find it then execute the play."
- **Gurkhas** — The kickoff coverage unit, named after British Army units comprised of Nepalese soldiers. They became famous for using a knife as their main weapon, and once they pull their knife there is no compromise. "It's either them or their adversary," April says. "Kickoff coverage we treat that way. It's us or them."
- **Rangers** — The punt return unit, named after U.S. Army troops whose motto is leave no man behind. Similarly, the punt return blockers don't want to leave the punt returner on his own.
- **Delta Force** — The punt coverage unit, named after the U.S. Army special forces, which use a lot of specialists. The punting unit plays offense before the ball is kicked and defense afterward and requires a lot of special skills.

- Artillery — The field goal unit, for obvious reasons.
- Cavalry — The field goal block unit. This group attacks the flanks and tries to get to the opponent's "artillery."

April grades every special teams player on every play and awards points — usually anywhere from 1 to 15 — for good blocks or tackles. A solo tackle is 12. An assisted tackle is either 5 or 8. A touchdown return is 25.

The points leader for each unit each game gets his picture on the big bulletin board in the back of the locker room. The points leader overall for each game gets his picture on the cover of the next week's special teams game plan.

"It makes it extremely fun because it gives you a sense of pride when you walk in on Tuesday or Wednesday morning and you see your picture up on the wall because you were the leader of a particular group," said safety George Wilson. "It gives you something to strive for outside of the game. It gives friendly competition among the special teams guys."

"If you reward people for what they're doing, I think they buy in a little more," said linebacker Kawika Mitchell. "People are definitely competing to get up on that board every week. So that's a lot different from where I've been."

April's motivational tools have been particularly helpful this year, because the Bills have had to rebuild their core of special teams aces. Gone from the teams of the previous four years are Josh Stamer, Mario Haggan, Coy Wire, Sam Aiken and Ryan Neufeld.

Filling the void have been Wilson, Scott, John Wendling, Blake Costanzo, Jon Corto, Justin Jenkins and the injured John DiGiorgio.

Punt coverage, with Wendling and Jenkins as the gunners (the outside men), has been good. The Bills' kickoff coverage hasn't been great, although Corto forced a key fumble in the opener.

"Losing a core group of guys like we did from our teams, it's going to take some time to find replacements and to build that chemistry that those guys had," Wilson said. "I feel like the guys are getting more and more comfortable playing with each other."

"I feel really good about the guys who have stepped in," April said. "Across the board, we're solid. Overall we're a few big plays away from really doing outstanding. I can say we're really doing well."

The Bills' organization has come to expect nothing less on special teams.

"Bobby April does an outstanding job, and really it's the whole organization in Buffalo," said Gary Zauner, a former NFL special teams coach who now is an Arizona-based consultant for NFL teams and special teams players. "When you have a head coach [Dick Jauron] who's a defensive guy, and when your pro personnel guy [John Guy] was a special teams coach, and when your college scouts have drafted well for special teamers, you're going to have success. It's all geared toward making special teams better."

Defensive head coaches typically think more about field position, and hence, special teams.

April gives his head coach, Jauron, plenty of credit.

"Special teams for him is a 365-day proposition," April said. "We never make any decisions, we never do anything without considering the impact on special teams. It goes from working with scouts, evaluating personnel, making decisions on the roster, the draft, offseason programs. We never do anything without special teams having a portion of that day's practice preparation, discussion ever. That doesn't exist everywhere."