

# UB's Neutz catches on quickly



UB wide receiver Alex Neutz was one of the few bright spots in a one-sided loss to Baylor on Saturday. Harry Scull Jr./Buffalo News

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Alex Neutz grew up in Grand Island but never fashioned himself as much of a Bills' fan as a kid. His detachment from his hometown team was more about indifference than disdain. He didn't have a favorite team or player. His limited knowledge about the NFL came from – where else? – video games.

It explained his blank expression Tuesday afternoon when he was told a man could make a living like 7-Eleven. To him, it must have sounded like a life of Slurpees and minimum wage. Actually, it was about the NFL. Ask Bills receiver Chris Hogan, who was dubbed “7-Eleven” last year in training camp because he was always open.

Chris Hogan, 7-Eleven, ring a bell, Alex?

Not really, no.

“I played Madden, and that was about it,” Neutz said. “I’m not a fan of the pros. I don’t watch football. I don’t keep up with any of that stuff.”

Cliffs' Notes version: Hogan spent four years playing lacrosse at Penn State and used a fifth year of athletic eligibility to play football at Monmouth. He had 12 catches for 147 yards during his entire senior season, or six more catches and 52 fewer yards than Neutz had last week in the first half against Baylor.

Neutz wasn't a football player until he was a sophomore in high school. He played varsity volleyball as a freshman before a coach at Grand Island discovered him dominating a flag-football game and told him to try out for the team. Three years later, he earned a scholarship to play wide receiver at the University at Buffalo.

The issue these days isn't whether he's keeping up with the NFL but whether anybody can keep up with him. He may not look the part or know the difference between Danny Amendola and shoe polish from Shinola, but he has learned enough from studying the game to turn any defensive back inside out.

"He says he doesn't know the game, but he does," quarterback Joe Licata said. "He's in there watching film all the time. He knows coverages. He's a very smart player. He may not know the history of the game or who the Bills are playing this week, but he knows how to play football. He knows how to read defenses."

And that, my friends, is the key.

Neutz doesn't have blazing speed. He runs the 40-yard dash in 4.6 seconds, slow enough for more scouts to turn away than pay attention. But he's 6-foot-3, 205 pounds, has long arms, great leaping ability, a knack for finding open areas, a gift for coming down with the ball. In terms of running precise pass routes, he has a PhD.

Baylor had as much speed as any team on UB's schedule this season, but he torched its secondary for six catches for 197 yards and a TD in the first half of the blowout loss. His career-high for yards in a game included a 54-yard post on the first play from scrimmage.

"It's really attacking the DBs' leverage," Neutz said. "On those deep posts, I was really stepping on their toes right before I make my break. It puts them in a bind. They're going to have to turn their hips late, and I'm going to get that little bit of separation that I need to catch the ball and bring it in."

Opposing coaches and players certainly know enough about Neutz, who had 65 catches for 1,015 yards and 11 touchdowns last season. You would think the book on slowing UB's passing game calls for covering Neutz from the moment he steps on campus. The search continues for someone who can.

All the Baylor game did was confirm that his performance against Ohio State a week earlier, when he had nine catches for 98 yards and another TD, wasn't a fluke. Last year, he had five catches for 52 yards and a touchdown against Georgia. That kind of production has become the norm at UB.

This season, he has 15 catches for 295 yards and two touchdowns in the two losses to football powerhouses. Neutz's yardage total is second in the nation among Division I receivers. His yardage total against Baylor was the second-most in UB history since the Bulls returned to Division I in 1999.

Bet the farm that Stony Brook will spend as much time trying to game-plan for Neutz as they will Branden Oliver or Khalik Mack before visiting Saturday. Neutz can expect double teams for the remainder of the season.

"I don't believe anybody is taking Alex Neutz lightly – at all," UB coach Jeff Quinn said. "If anybody does that, I would be shocked. Any time you have quality talent with great speed, great focus, great concentration, great competitive fire, it's tough to stop those kinds of players."

And that's what NFL teams need more than anything.

You see highlights every week of receivers making big plays, but the reality is possession receivers are more valuable than any burner who can't catch. Scouts can turn their heads on Neutz for only so long before they're forced to pay attention.

Neutz is virtually certain to get a chance to play in the NFL one way or another. There's a good chance he'll get drafted. It's not a bad way to make a living.

"I've considered that, sure," he said. "There are scouts around practice every day. There are people talking about it. You don't let it get too high up there, but it's there. It's a possibility. Not

many people get this opportunity. I have to make the most of it. I have a chance to do something special with my life.”

It sure beats 7-Eleven.