



How Jake Bates went from soccer prodigy to brick salesman to rising star with the Lions

Dan Pompei
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On the night before a Lions game, kicker Jake Bates is feeling twitchy.

Of course he is.

The first field goal he ever made at any level was last year. In 37 college games at Texas State and Arkansas, he made more tackles — two — than field goals — zero. In his high school career, Bates attempted two field goals and missed both.

Now he’s thinking about kicking in a stadium in front of 70,000 fans, maybe with the game on the line.

He knows what will make him calm.

At the Lions hotel, he meets with the team clinician, who instructs him to close his eyes and walk through the hours leading up to the game so that when the time comes, it will be as if he has been there before.

After dinner, he hits the ice cream bar, preparing a bowl so enormous that it’s a topic of conversation among teammates. He loads up the bowl with brownies, broken-up Oreos, waffle cone pieces, caramel and whipped cream.

“Oh, man, it’s the biggest bowl of ice cream I think I’ve ever seen,” says Lions punter Jack Fox, who is also Bates’ holder. “It’s like a five-scoop bowl.”

The thing is, Bates usually eats cleanly and abstains from sweets — except on the night before a game. To him, that bowl of ice cream is like a deep breath.

In the morning, there are rituals.

He arrives at the stadium and walks onto the field in street clothes.

In the locker room, it must be sock on the right foot, shoe on the right foot, sock on the left foot, shoe on the left foot.

Before he warms up, he sits on the field with his eyes closed. “It’s feeling the ground and almost trying to connect my mind to the turf,” he says. As he does it, he envisions what the game will be like.

need to breathe.

Back in the locker room, he avoids conversation. Everyone knows to leave him alone, like a baseball pitcher working on a no-no.

The last thing Bates does before heading out to the field is read a Bible verse in which the apostle Paul exhorts the Hebrews to “throw off everything that hinders.”

As Bates prepares for the opening kickoff, he’s not twitchy anymore.

People everywhere are wondering what he’s doing here.

Jake Bates, though, has no doubt he’s where he’s supposed to be.

Bates family lore tells a story about 18-month-old Jake. His brother, Cole, who was 18 months older, signed up to play on a YMCA soccer team. Jake had to have a uniform like Cole, and managed to take the field while the family was watching one of Cole’s games. From then on, he was the team’s goalie, making both saves and fans.

At 10, he began playing club soccer in Tomball, Texas. By then, he had the leg strength of someone who had been born on the planet Krypton.

At a soccer camp at Texas A&M, the speed of the participants’ kicks was measured with a radar gun. Bates, who was matched with older kids, had the fastest kick.

As an 11-year-old, he became a starter on Cole’s team of 13-year-olds. He began playing academy soccer at 14. He once hit a free kick from about 40 yards that defied physics’ laws — rising over the wall, bending hard and going in upper 90. A video of it went viral.



Like then-teammate Chris Richards, left, Jake Bates was on the fast track in soccer, but he eventually got burned out on the sport and wanted to try football. (Courtesy of Mariana Bates)

Eventually, he became the right center back for Texans SC. The left center back was Chris Richards, who now plays for Crystal Palace of the Premier League as well as the United States national team.

Richards was taller, faster and more athletic, but Bates made plays, too.

“I would put him up against anybody as a center back, but that’s from mother eyes,” his mom, Mariana, says. “We’ve said all along he could be playing at that (Premier League) level with Chris. What he lacked in speed, he made up for in knowing angles.”

The pair led their team to the national championship in 2017.

On his soccer team at Tomball High, Bates earned all-district first-team honors and was voted offensive MVP of his team.

He started as a freshman and sophomore at the University of Central Arkansas. He scored a goal on the road in the 82nd minute to beat Missouri State for the ASUN conference championship in 2018.

Bates *loved* playing soccer.

Until he didn’t.

“He kind of burned out on it,” his mom says.

It can happen when you’ve been consumed by something for 18 of your 20 years. Bates told himself playing somewhere else would relight the fire. Rutgers offered a spot; he said no. His dream was to play for SMU, and then they finally wanted him. But soccer just didn’t feel right.

He walked away.

Bates played football his senior year of high school and was the second-string kicker to a sophomore. The two kickers kept in touch, and after Bates was done with soccer, he practiced his field goal kicking with his friend for fun.

coach he could. One responded, and he was given an opportunity at Texas State.

His only job was kickoffs. Before his first game, he listened to agitating music that he thought would pump him up. One of the assistant coaches pounded his forehead into Bates’ for motivation. Then Bates kicked his first kickoff as hard as he could — and “duck hooked” it out of bounds.

“What I learned,” he says, “is I have to do what I can to stay as calm as possible.”

He remembered that lesson when he transferred to Arkansas, where his 64 touchbacks were third most in the country in 2022.

The Razorbacks’ field goal kicker was future Jacksonville Jaguar Cam Little, and he knew better than almost anyone about Bates’ potential. Little convinced independent kicking coach Adam Tanalski to give Bates a spot at Hammer Kicking Academy, where Little and others trained in preparation for the draft.

The first couple of days at the camp, Bates felt pressure to prove he belonged.

He kicked like he didn’t.

“I remember thinking I can’t make a kick,” he says. “It was shockingly bad. I walked away from some practices thinking I must be the worst kicker in the world.”

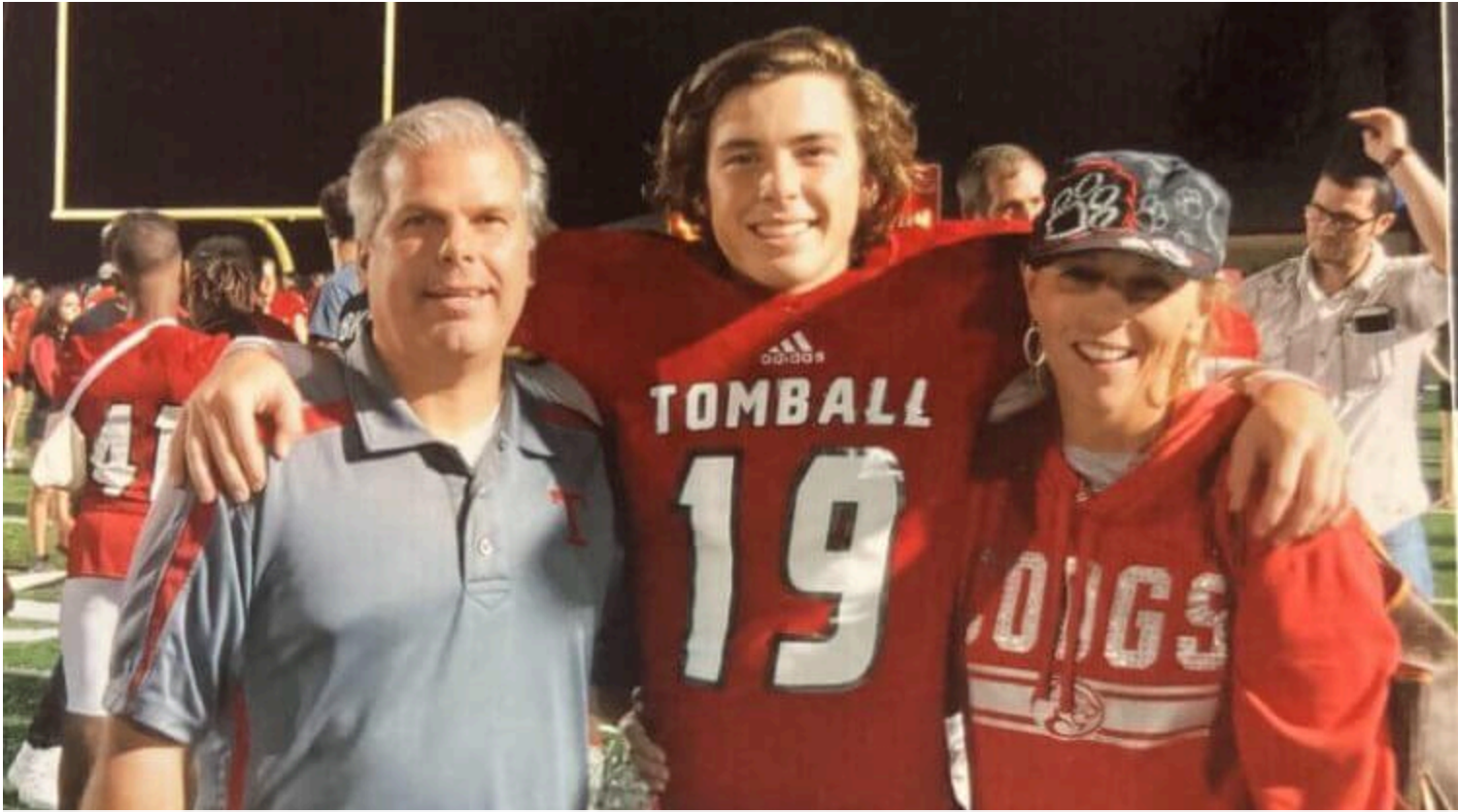
After one awful practice, he called his father, Jonathan, and told him he was out of his league. Then he got on LinkedIn to look for a real-world job.

Tanalski eventually helped settle and refine him, and Bates made it through nine weeks in the program.

Bates wasn’t drafted, but a few months later in training camp, Texans kicker Ka’imi Fairbairn strained his quadriceps. The Texans needed a kicker to fill in for a preseason game, so they signed Bates, whom they knew was living close by and had been to the team’s local pro day.

Against the Patriots, Bates attempted three extra points, missing one. He was released two days later when Fairbairn was ready to return.

That’s when he finally gave up on football.



Jake Bates, flanked by his father, Jonathan, and mother, Mariana, joined the football team as a senior in high school. He could not have predicted then where the sport would take him. (Courtesy of Mariana Bates)

of about 50 shades of red brick, he says. He knows because he took a job selling bricks for Acme Brick in the fall of 2023. When he joined the company, he told his boss he was done kicking, and he meant it. This, he thought, would be his “grown-up job.”

Three weeks later, that changed.

As the general manager of the UFL’s Michigan Panthers, Steve Kazor doesn’t have a budget to scout the country. But he looks for reasons to drive to nearby schools from his home in Texas. One weekend in the fall of 2022, he dropped off his wife, Colleen, at her sister’s house in Arkansas. Then he drove to Arkansas to take in a practice.

His eyes opened wide when a kicker hit the upright from his own 30-yard line on a kickoff. The school’s pro liaison showed Kazor tape of the kicker hitting the upright three times on kickoffs.

As Kazor prepared for the 2024 season, he and Panthers head coach Mike Nolan wanted to add a kickoff specialist. Kazor, who coached special teams in the NFL for 14 years, thought about the kicker he saw at Arkansas.

Bates’ agent, Marty Magid, showed Kazor more tape of Bates, and Kazor signed him, thinking he would be a kickoff specialist only, with another kicker handling field goals and extra points. In training camp, Bates’ kickoffs were spectacular. And he also nailed field goal after field goal.

The Panthers wouldn’t need two kickers after all.

Late in the season opener, Michigan trailed St. Louis 16-15. With three seconds to play, Bates attempted — and hit — a 64-yard field goal. But the opponent had called a timeout.

Then he hit it again.

That 64-yard game-winner was the first field goal he made in his life. If it had happened in the NFL, at the time, it would have tied for the second-longest ever behind Justin Tucker’s 66-yarder.

Later that season, he also hit a 62-yard field goal and a 60-yarder in games. In practice, with the help of a friendly breeze, he made one from 75 yards.

When the UFL season ended, teams contacted Magid to request tryouts. Magid refused. Bates didn’t need to try out. The Chiefs, Colts, Ravens and Cardinals were interested. Then the Commanders, Lions and Packers made offers. Bates visited all three.

The Lions offered one of the best contracts ever for a street free agent — two years, \$1.98 million, with \$150,000 guaranteed. And they offered more, including a championship-caliber roster, a culture that made him feel he belonged and a schedule that featured 15 of 17 games indoors.

They seemed perfect for him — except for the presence of Michael Badgley, who had gone three-for-three on field goals in the previous postseason for Detroit, including nailing a 54-yard game-winner against the Rams.

Then Badgley tore his hamstring early in camp.

Many assumed another kicker would be signed, but Lions special teams coach Dave Fipp believed fiercely in Bates and told anyone who would listen they needed to buy in on him. Head coach Dan Campbell trusted Fipp. That meant no training camp competition.

There were skeptics, but being underestimated probably was beneficial for Bates. “He’s so determined to prove people wrong who didn’t think he was good enough,” Fipp says.

including his last one, a 40-yarder that was supposed to lead to an overtime segment. After that practice, he called his then-fiancee, Presley Folkert, who became his wife in March.

“I’m getting cut tomorrow,” he told her. “There’s no way they can keep me.”

Instead of cutting Bates, Campbell told him he didn’t need to be perfect. Fipp told him to focus on one kick and only one — the next. Teammates never sniped at him.

That wouldn’t have happened on some teams. Probably most teams.

“I had so many people telling me I would be OK, calm down, I’ll figure it out,” he says.

In the first preseason game, he kicked a 53-yard field goal in bad weather against the Giants. Bates started to think he could do this. Then a 30-yard field goal attempt went wide right.

Before the miss, he told himself, “Don’t miss it, don’t miss it, don’t miss it.”

Fipp encouraged positive thoughts. “You never want to say, ‘Don’t miss,’” he told him. “You want to say, ‘Put it through the middle.’”



Jake Bates believes his intense preparation helps him make up for his lack of experience. (David Reginek / Imagn Images)

The following week, Campbell held a “fowling” tournament for his team. Fowling is a cross between football and bowling, in which participants try to knock over pins by throwing a football at them.

That’s when the Lions saw something in Bates they didn’t realize was there — a shark. You don’t always find it in players who are supposed to be hunters, but it clearly was there in the kicker.

“The bigger the throw, the more he was on,” Fipp says. “You could see his focus and lock in.”

Bates’ team — he was with then-long snapper Scott Daly and assistant special teams coach Jett Modkins — advanced to the championship game before losing in sudden death.

Campbell and Fipp were feeling good but thinking soberly. Their plan for Bates was to gradually build his confidence early in the season with easy kicks. His first field goal attempt in the season opener was a 25-yarder. Then, with 17 seconds remaining and the Lions trailing the Rams by three, they needed him to hit a 32-yarder. He delivered and the Lions won in overtime.

In his first four games, Bates wasn’t asked to kick a field goal longer than 35 yards, and he didn’t attempt a kick beyond 48 yards until his seventh game. He made his first 19 attempts, the second-longest streak to begin a career in NFL history.

You know Campbell was tempted to see Bates boom. During a team practice period, Bates hit a 68-yard field goal. When he was kicking on the side, he nailed a 70-yarder. Then there was a two-minute drill, and Bates kicked a field goal of about 50 yards. Not only did he drill the ball through the uprights, but also he drilled it into the drywall behind the post, leaving a hole in the wall.

“It was repaired the next day, but there is probably still a mark,” Fox says.

Fipp, a 17-year NFL veteran, says Bates has the most powerful leg he’s ever seen.

Fipp often stands behind Bates when he’s kicking in practice. “Every time I look at him getting ready to approach the ball, I see this huge quad hanging off the side of his leg,” he says. “And I’m like, damn.”

Bates’ leg strength is so explosive that he can dunk a basketball. He says he is 6-feet-1, not 5-10 as he’s listed, however. It’s just another way he’s underestimated.

Bates says some of his leg strength is “God’s gift.” But he enhances the gift with an elaborate stretching routine that takes up an hour every night, year-round.


His stretching also might have brought him more attention than any of his field goals, as cameras caught him looking somewhat sensual while trying to loosen a knot in his hip by rolling on a soft massage ball during a game in San Francisco. His routine became a meme, and a carpet company used a photo of him stretching on a billboard with the promise, “CARPET LAID TOMORROW.”

As the season went on, Bates also drew more attention for field goals. Against the Texans, he hit a 58-yarder to tie the game with five minutes left, and then a 52-yarder to win as time expired. It was one of three game-winners he kicked.


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He also set the team record for points scored in a season and led the league with 85 touchbacks.

Everything is different heading into Year 2. Bates will be tested by higher expectations, devil winds and maybe missed kicks that can ruin victories and confidence.

“I expect he’ll have ups and downs, but I also expect he’ll continue to get better and better,” Fipp says. “I think he’s got a chance to be one of the best who ever played.”

Malcolm Gladwell’s 10,000-hour rule says a skill isn’t mastered before 10,000 hours of practice. Bates may be the only player in the league who hasn’t reached 10,000 hours. He believes the experience he lacks is offset by the intensity of his preparation.

“I would put myself up against anybody, and I think I’ve worked harder,” he says.

Campbell is convinced Bates will follow up a good year with a better one.

“Love Bates,” he says. “He’s wired the right way. He puts the work in. He’s mentally strong. When a mistake was made, he kept it simple and corrected the cause of it. He didn’t get lost in his own head.”

So now we understand why he’s here — the cannon leg, commitment like Thomas Edison, the tiger’s eye, brilliant coaching and development, and the ability to achieve Zen.

And there’s more.

After Bates’ game-winning kick against the Texans, NBC wanted to interview him on the field. He had about 25 seconds, so he closed his eyes and prayed.

When Melissa Stark asked him about going from bricks to kicks, he went blank.

And then he spoke. “It just shows how good the Lord is,” he said. “He’s so faithful. If anything, I hope people can see Jesus through my story. That’s what I think I’m here to do — not make or miss or be a good kicker or bad kicker, but spread the love of Jesus.”

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The Athletic's Rustin Dodd tried to drink coffee like Lions coach Dan Campbell for a day, partly because it sounded fun and partly to learn.

After quitting soccer, Bates wanted to be a football player so desperately that he even tried punting. He signed up to be an equipment manager at Arkansas, hoping it could lead to a kicking tryout. It didn’t. When Arkansas later gave him a chance to kick — but no scholarship — he and his family paid his way, gladly.

For most of his life, Bates saw an athlete in the mirror. After the Texans released him and it appeared his days as an athlete were over, he wasn’t sure what he saw.

What struck Jake Bates, brick salesman, was that he had to be something more than what he did.

And now he is.

“I’m not just Jake Bates, football player,” he says. “I love playing football and work really hard at it, but that doesn’t define me, and it’s not the most important thing in my life.”

In his lowest moments, he surrendered, realizing his journey had to be directed by God’s will, not his. Now he is convinced that this opportunity he has is divine.

It takes so many things to kick the long field goals that are his specialty. Of course, it takes a powerful stroke. It takes a precise plant, just the right body lean, contact with the sweet spot of the foot and a graceful follow-through.

And it takes something else — perspective.

Now, before one of those attempts, Bates tells himself, “Don’t make it bigger than it needs to be.”

(Photo: Alex Slitz / Getty Images)



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Dan Pompei is a senior writer for The Athletic who has been telling NFL stories for four decades. He is one of 49 members on the Pro Football Hall of Fame selectors board and one of nine members on the Seniors Committee. In 2013, he received the Bill Nunn Award from the Pro Football Writers of America for long and distinguished reporting. He was a Zenger Prize winner in 2024. Follow Dan on Twitter [@danpompei](#)

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