

Tech's Crabtree quick to catch on

Tech receiver Crabtree is new to the position, but putting up huge numbers

LUBBOCK – Texas Tech wide receiver Michael Crabtree's first football experience left his father concerned.

Not for his son, but his opponents.

At 5 years old, Crabtree played in his first – and only – flag football game and scored a touchdown on his first carry.

"Kids tried to grab his flag, and he just ran over them, and I said, 'Well, I guess this is the end of his flag career,'" said his father, also named Michael Crabtree. "He was too physical. I was worried because I didn't want the parents getting mad at me for him hurting their kids.

"He didn't take any mercy on anybody."

Fifteen years later, Crabtree is still overwhelming his competition. The redshirt freshman from Carter leads the nation in receptions (70), receiving yards (1,074), touchdown catches (17) and scoring (102 points).

Crabtree, whose media availability has been limited by Tech to three postgame opportunities, has put up phenomenal numbers despite his lack of experience at receiver. He played quarterback at Carter as a junior and senior in a run-based Wing-T, finishing his high school career with one catch for 19 yards.

"He would make things happen with the football in his hands, and that is the reason he was the quarterback," Carter coach Allen Wilson said. "He's still just a baby at receiver. When he really understands what is going on, he's going to be exceptional."

That's scary considering Crabtree has been the talk of college football. He's already broken the NCAA freshman record for touchdown catches in a season (14). His 17 touchdown receptions ties a Big 12 record set in 2002 by Oklahoma State's Rashaun Woods, and Crabtree is just at the halfway mark of his regular season.

He's on pace to break the NCAA Division I record for touchdown catches in a season (27), held by Troy Edwards (Louisiana Tech) and Jerry Rice (Mississippi Valley State). Crabtree also has a chance at NCAA season records for receptions (142) and receiving yards (2,157).

Crabtree has been so impressive that Texas Tech coach Mike Leach didn't discount his big-play threat from Heisman Trophy consideration.

"It's getting a little harder to ignore," Leach said. He's "looking a little bit more inviting at this point."

Crabtree (6-3, 208) has two negatives working against him for serious Heisman consideration, however. He's playing in an air-it-out offense that annually produces big numbers, and Tech's competition thus far has been subpar.

The Red Raiders host Texas A&M on Saturday, and still have to face Oklahoma and Texas.

Nose for the end zone

Crabtree's father said his son always had a knack for scoring touchdowns. Michael Crabtree said his son was so impressive through his grade-school years that he had to move him up a division so he could play with boys two years older.

Once when Crabtree's father tried to get him to play with kids his own age, he responded, "I don't want to play with those little boys."

But playing against older boys never stopped Crabtree from excelling. As a sixth-grader, he accounted for five touchdowns in a game at five different positions (quarterback, receiver, running back, defensive back and kickoff returner).

"When he played kids his own age, he would dominate them because he was bigger and stronger," said his father, who lives in Garland. "I've coached him since he was 5, so I'm used to seeing him score touchdowns. He can smell the end zone."

Wilson said Crabtree showed him his competitiveness as a quarterback on the freshman team. An opposing receiver was having a big game, and Crabtree walked over to the freshman coach to give him a word of advice.

"He said, 'Coach, put me in. I can get him. I can shut him down,'" Wilson said. "And he did."

Crabtree jumped to Carter's varsity as a sophomore and played some at receiver (he only had nine offensive touches). Wilson said he

noted Crabtree's athleticism and moved him to quarterback for his last two high school seasons.

As a senior, Crabtree passed for 870 yards and 11 touchdowns and rushed for 646 yards and nine touchdowns.

"Whatever 'it' is, he has it," Wilson said. "The kid has something special."

His father said Carter's run-first offense wasn't best suited for his son, but he made the most of it.

"He'd often pitch the ball back and run up like a fullback as the lead blocker," his father said. "He used to come home and his arm would be all bruised up."

Crabtree was also a standout basketball player at Carter. As a senior, he averaged 20.8 points, 6.7 rebounds and 3.1 assists per game.

Crabtree said before his first game this season that he would also like to play basketball at Tech for coach Bob Knight. He has yet to broach the subject with Leach, however.

Transition to receiver

Texas Tech was one of the few schools that recruited Crabtree at receiver. He also had scholarship offers from Oklahoma, Kansas State, Kansas, Baylor, Illinois and Iowa, but those schools wanted him to play defensive back.

"We felt like he was a great athlete," Leach said. "The surprise with him is he was able to make the transition to receiver as fast as he did."

But it hasn't happened overnight. Leach said Crabtree would have gotten playing time as a true freshman, but he had NCAA clearinghouse issues related to academics and ultimately redshirted.

Crabtree said he took it hard.

"It was frustrating because everybody expected me to play," he said. "But it really helped me. I know the offense so much better than I did when I came in."

During his redshirt season, Crabtree impressed coaches with his performances during Thursday Night Football, a Tech tradition that gives scout-team and younger players the chance to play regularly and learn the system.

Crabtree showed his progression during the spring game, catching three passes for 112 yards and two touchdowns.

Immediate impact

He started the season fast (12 catches for 106 yards and three touchdowns) in front of several relatives in Dallas in Tech's win over SMU.

After the game, Crabtree was asked if everyone could expect him to have three touchdown catches from quarterback Graham Harrell each game.

"If he calls my number three times," Crabtree said, "you can expect three touchdowns."

He's backed up his words. He has three touchdown catches in five of Tech's six games.

Crabtree's only letdown came when he dropped a pass in the end zone against Oklahoma State with 19 seconds left that could have won the game for the Red Raiders. The pass was slightly behind Crabtree and deflected off his left shoulder.

"He was upset at himself because he knew he should have caught it," his father said, "but he left it on the field and didn't take it with him."

Harrell said he's not surprised by Crabtree's fast start.

"He's an unbelievable player," Harrell said. "He has a chance to be as good as he wants to be."

Crabtree has had such a fast start that the question becomes how long will he stay at Tech if he maintains his current pace. His father said Crabtree would enter the NFL draft as soon as possible, which would be following his sophomore season.

"If he continues to do this in his first two years, I think he'll be out of there," his father said. "You don't want to risk a major injury, and by the time it's his senior year, it would be like playing with those little boys again."

**Dallas Morning News, Brandon George
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RECORD PACE

Comparing Tech receiver Michael Crabtree's projected 12-game statistics with the NCAA Division I records for a season:

Statistics	Projections	Records
Rec.	140	142
Rec. Yds.	2,148	2,060
Rec. TD	34	27
Points	204	234

CRABTREE'S LAST THREE GAMES

Date	Opponent	Rec.	Yards	TDs
Sept. 3	SMU	12	106	3
Sept. 8	UTEP	15	188	2
Sept. 15	Rice	11	244	3
Sept. 22	Okla. St.	14	237	3
Sept. 29	NW (La.) St.	8	145	3
Oct. 6	Iowa State	10	154	3

MICHAEL CRABTREE**School:** Texas Tech**Position:** Wide receiver**Class:** Redshirt freshman**Ht., Wt.:** 6-3, 208

Notable: The 20-year-old Carter graduate is a cousin of former Texas Tech All-American running back Ricky Williams. ... For the season, Crabtree has 15 more catches, 347 more receiving yards, eight more touchdown catches and five more touchdowns than the person who ranks second in each NCAA category. ... Crabtree has four brothers and one sister. ... His father, Michael Crabtree, lives in Garland and played football and basketball in high school at Bishop Dunne. His mother, Bessie Turner, lives in Dallas and was a track athlete in high school. ... Crabtree's 244 receiving yards against Rice were 19 yards shy of the NCAA freshman record and 11 yards short of the school record. ... Crabtree's 15 catches against UTEP tied a Tech record.

If Texas Tech WR Michael Crabtree keeps up even half his pace, do you see him grabbing some awards and national attention at the end of the year?

Brian Davis: I hate to say it, but there is a bias toward Tech from those folks in LA or on the East Coast. Right or wrong, the perception about Tech is that "it's the system." Too many good players have already come through and put up excellent numbers. Crabtree will have to win respect by putting up monster numbers in the games that really count against A&M, Texas and OU. If he does that on a big stage, the national media will take notice. If Tech keeps winning, they will notice, too.