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Vikings quarterback Christian Ponder discussed his rookie NFL season and life in Minnesota at his town home in Eden Prairie.

# TRIAL AND ERROR

Christian Ponder is learning to be an NFL QB (first start, first boos, first injury — check, check and check), a grownup (the gorilla roommate probably will have to go) and a Minnesotan (the hunting skills need work).

By **DAN WIEDERER** • dan.wiederer@startribune.com

**S**unk into his couch with an afternoon installment of SportsCenter rolling, Christian Ponder shrugged and looked toward the ceiling. He can't quite nail down an exact description for his first season in the NFL. He just knows it's been chaotic. ¶ "I don't know," Ponder said. "I don't know. I guess you could say a lot has happened. A lot. So occasionally you have to take a step back and process it all. You try to take it all in without getting too overwhelmed. It's been a crazy season. But it also feels like the time has flown by." ¶ Hence the shrug.

Yet as the Vikings quarterback zeroed back in on the TV, he was asked to address the elephant in the room.

Well actually, it's a giant stuffed blue gorilla propped up in the corner. This he snagged from a kid at the Minnesota State Fair in exchange for a couple Vikings pre-season tickets.

That the gorilla remains the dominant decoration in the living room of Ponder's town home is another small example of a rookie still needing to get settled.

"George needs to go soon," Ponder's girlfriend noted.

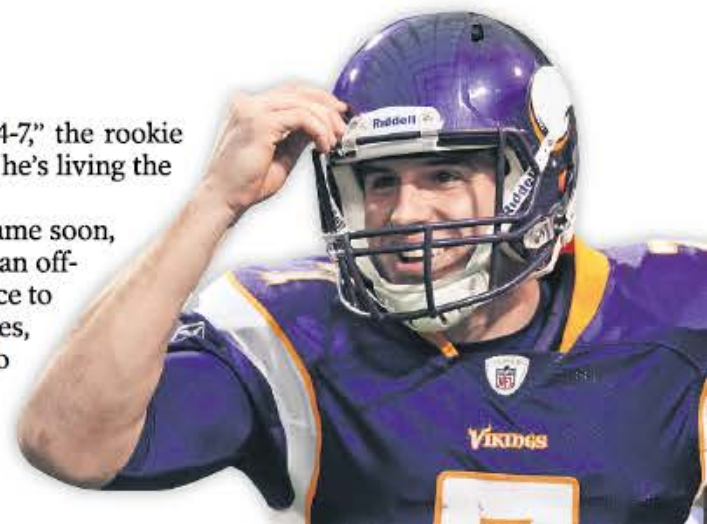
Ponder agreed, planning to hand the gorilla off to backup Joe Webb as a gift for his kid. Still, Ponder can't ignore

George's apparent glee.

"He's got a smile on his face 24-7," the rookie quarterback joked. "If you ask me, he's living the dream."

Ponder hopes to be doing the same soon, excited for the months ahead and an off-season that should give him a chance to finally settle down in a town he loves, playing for a franchise he hopes to help resurrect.

**Ponder continues on C7 ▶**



# Christian Ponder's ups and downs



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Christian Ponder's first pro start started with a bang on Oct. 23 when he connected with Michael Jenkins on a 72-yard pass against Green Bay.

## THE UPS

- 1 In Week 7, Ponder's first pass of his first NFL start was a 72-yard bomb to Michael Jenkins against Green Bay. Two plays later, he added his first career TD toss, a 2-yarder to Visanthe Shiancoe.
- 2 Ponder's play in Carolina in Week 8 was nothing fancy. But there was nothing disastrous either. Playing with noticeable composure, he went 18-for-28 for 236 yards and a TD without a turnover, registering his first NFL win.
- 3 Despite losing a fumble inside the Denver 10 and having an interception returned for a TD in the first quarter in Week 13, Ponder showed enough mental toughness to bounce back and throw for a season-best 381 yards.



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Indicative of his struggles in recent weeks, Ponder suffered a concussion against Washington one play after Adrian Peterson blew out his left knee.

## THE DOWNS

- 1 That resolve Ponder showed against the Broncos? It all went for naught when he threw an interception deep in his own territory with 1:33 to play in a tie game. Denver kicked a last-second 23-yard field goal for a 35-32 victory.
- 2 Ponder's struggles in Week 14 at Detroit were troubling. Struggling with a hip pointer, he was 11-for-21 for 115 yards with three interceptions and a lost fumble when he was pulled in the third quarter with the Vikings trailing 31-14.
- 3 One play after Adrian Peterson blew out his knee in Washington, Ponder suffered a concussion on a big hit by Redskins linebacker London Fletcher. He was unable to finish a game for the second time in three weeks.

DAN WIEDERER

# TRIAL AND ERROR

## ◀ PONDER FROM C1

### Drop in approval ratings

So far, Ponder loves Minnesota. But the bigger question is how long the adoration will be reciprocated.

On Oct. 19, when Ponder held his first weekly news conference as the Vikings' starting quarterback, he came to the lectern bright-eyed and carefree. He was the giddy rookie ready to start writing a Hollywood script.

This week? Fittingly, Ponder appeared a bit more grizzled. Four days removed from suffering a concussion that knocked him out of the Washington win, he had a full beard and numerous battle scars. A nasty scab adorned the top of his right hand. His lip was cut. He had a bright red scrape across the bridge of his nose.

"There goes my modeling career," he quipped.

In a span of 10 weeks, Ponder has gone from the rookie prospect everyone wanted to see to the inconsistent starter who absorbed several small showers of boos during his last Mall of America Field performance.

Lauded in October for his assertiveness and charisma, Ponder has self-diagnosed his recent struggles as a byproduct of being uptight. He's identified it as a stage.

"I think I just fell into the trap of putting too much pressure on myself and not letting myself go," Ponder says. "I need to show that I am learning, that there is growth. But there has to be a way to limit my mistakes without pulling the reins back too much."

Sunday's game against Chicago provides one last opportunity for Ponder to prove his progress. And silly as it sounds, he wants to make sure he doesn't forget the benefits of being a giddy, instinctive rookie.

"When you start thinking too much, that speed keeps picking up because you are already one step behind," Ponder says. "So although you need to know what you are doing on the field, you can't really think about it. You just need to react."



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George, a stuffed gorilla, stands in the corner of Christian Ponder's living room and has been with the rookie quarterback every step of the way.

Sometimes the shiny new toy just needs to have the batteries changed.

### 'All of this stuff takes time'

Ponder's cluttered living room provides a fitting snapshot of a 23-year-old in transition. The memorabilia on display is as random as it is scattered. In addition to the gorilla, the Bobby Bowden Award he received last winter from the Fellowship of Christian Athletes sits on a bar wedged behind the Christmas tree.

On a shelf to the right of the TV is a painted ball from Florida State's 2006 Emerald Bowl victory, a game Ponder didn't even play in and is most notable for the academic scandal that later vacated the Seminoles' victory.

The two game balls Ponder has from his rookie season? The one from his first touchdown pass — a 2-yard pitch to Visanthe Shiancoe in Week 7 — is still, he thinks, somewhere in his locker at Winter Park.

The ball from his first victory — a 24-21 triumph in Carolina — remains in his car.

"I've got nowhere to put those right now," Ponder says. "When I move into a bigger house, I'll make sure to get those taken care of."

Heck, even Ponder's black Lab, Dal-

las, is no longer around, sent back to live with the quarterback's parents after it became clear the dog grew too frazzled spending his days alone.

"Anytime we'd leave, he'd go absolutely crazy," Ponder says. "He'd get some sort of anxiety when he was by himself. He tore up a coat, ripped down our blinds. He ate an entire coffee cake off the kitchen counter. Then he threw that up on my bed."

Dallas will return to the Twin Cities once Ponder has a chance to find a new home with a bigger yard plus a second dog to serve as a companion.

Just one more thing on the checklist. "All of this stuff takes time," Ponder says.

### Teammates have his back

Ask Ponder directly about his future and he'll tell you with great conviction that he knows he has what it takes to succeed in the NFL.

It's also clear he understands the tightrope he needs to cross to transform his belief into proof.

That's why Ponder must soon quell any anxiety that's growing within the fan base or inside the locker room.

"That does make a difference," he says.

Ponder isn't rushing for the offseason. But he'll welcome it when it arrives. Next week, for example, he'll be in an icehouse at Lake of the Woods with center John Sullivan, guard Steve Hutchinson and tight end Jim Kleinsasser.

Ponder has no idea what to expect of his first ice-fishing trip.

Sullivan offers these words of encouragement: "It's desolate. But it'll be fun. And Christian doesn't have to worry about the ice breaking beneath him."

Sullivan has a growing appreciation for Ponder's willingness to step outside his comfort zone. Heck, during the Vikings' bye week, he was with the rookie quarterback on a pheasant hunting trip in South Dakota.

Perhaps fittingly, Ponder couldn't figure out how to hold his shotgun properly, struggled with his aim and returned to the Twin Cities with a small bruise on his shoulder from the constant recoiling.

"I didn't hit much," Ponder says. "The birds were constantly on the move. They're flying in all directions, going directly over your head. You have to lead them and keep shooting. Let's just say my hunting skills need work."

This is where Sullivan shrugs.

"Christian was rough around the edges but only because he was so new to it," Sullivan says. "Part of what I took away from that trip is that he is trying to embrace the things that people do in Minnesota. He wants to become a longtime member of this community. And in everything he does, you can see his drive to get better. One of the things that's impressed me most is he's been good at letting things roll off his back very easily."

Who knew a bye-week hunting trip would become a metaphor for a rookie quarterback's inconsistent initiation into the NFL?

Says Sullivan: "With all the mistakes and setbacks that come in a season like this, they can either scar you and hold you back. Or you can allow them to be a learning tool. With Christian, if you spend any time with him, he's incredibly motivated, he's intelligent. He's going to be successful. He just needs time to settle in."