

By Joe Sager

UNIVERSITY PARK — Competition is what fuels the LaVerde family.

From individual success on athletic fields and courts to classrooms and professional environments, members of Oil City's famous family are ready to bring it each and every time.

Especially in backyard wiffle ball.

The LaVerdes and some of their friends have staged epic battles during their times together when the crew all converge on Oil City each year.

That competitiveness helped guide Jake LaVerde to an historic high school football career in Ohio and land him at Penn State University this summer.

"We play a lot of wiffle ball," LaVerde said with a laugh. "It gets pretty intense. We'll have a game with everyone, like my two sisters, my two cousins and then, when that's done, we'll have a competitive game with just the guys. My dad and my uncle, Matt, will be captains and pick teams."

Oil City product Steven Heise, a member of the LaVerde family, participates and you can find Oilers Spence Singleton and Cole McMahon getting involved as well.

"We have some battles," LaVerde said with a laugh. "It's a fun family to part of. When we get together, it's all super competitive. It's just fun getting everyone together."

Constant competition helped LaVerde guide Kirtland to two state championships in his four years guiding the Hornets to a 49-3 record. He became the first player in OHSAA history to start four state championship games at quarterback in December when he led the team to a 41-6 victory over Hopewell-Loudon.

He finished his career with 3,167 passing and 3,174 rushing yards — the first player in program history to join the 3,000-3,000 club. He passed for 43 touchdowns and scored 40 on the ground, also the first player in Kirtland history to be part of the 40-40 club. He was named the co-Division VI Offensive Player of the Year. All of those numbers would be higher, except he missed seven games in 2024 with arm surgery and ankle surgery last fall sidelined him for four games.

“I am super grateful for my time at Kirtland,” he said. “I couldn’t have asked for a better four years.”

LaVerde had the unique chance to play under his father, Tiger, who has guided the program to eight state championships and six state runner-up finishes ever since he took over as head coach in 2006. Jake also had the chance to play his freshman season with older brother, Phil, who was a senior.

“I’ve been blessed to be a part of this with my brother for a year and my dad,” Jake said. “I am grateful for the program it set me up with.”

Initially, playing football at Penn State wasn’t really on Jake’s radar. His MVP performance at the Ohio North-South Classic in April got the wheels turning, though. Selected to play on the defensive side, he had multiple stops in the game. He filled in at quarterback and threw a touchdown pass and led his team in rushing.

“That was a fun week to be a part of — I didn’t know what to expect,” he said. “They recruited me for the game as a safety. One of the quarterbacks on the team wanted to play at outside backer since that’s what he’s playing in college. The staff knew I played quarterback and asked me to play both ways. In the game, it was just working with me at QB and we just kept rolling and I ended up being MVP. It was an awesome opportunity. It was a fun chance to play and not be injured, too.”

It was a final chance for Jake to play a football game under his dad, who was on the North team’s coaching staff. Tiger has built a power at Kirtland, where he is 259-21. He reached the 250-win mark faster than any coach in Ohio high school football history. Per the Kirtland Stat Crew, the Kirtland football team is the winningest high school football program in the nation since 2011. Over the past 16 seasons, Kirtland leads the nation in wins (212), winning percentage (.955) and fewest losses (10). For his career, Tiger is now 279-31, which includes a 20-10 record in three seasons at Franklin.

“He’s such a phenomenal coach and an even better person,” Jake said. “The guys want to work hard for him because of the type of coach, teacher and role model he is to them. He gets those guys wanting to do things for him, not because they feel like they have to do it — they feel it’s a privilege to play for him. They want to be at the best of their abilities to be the next Kirtland football team that goes far. The program he has built at Kirtland is super special. We’re all blessed to be a part of it.”

Penn State first-year head coach Matt Campbell played with Jake’s uncle, Matt, at Mount Union, but he already had Jake on his radar after scouting Kirtland for many years while he was coaching at Toledo and Iowa State. He was quick to offer Jake a preferred walk-on spot as a safety with the Nittany Lions last month.

“I really didn’t know if I was going to play in college because of the injuries I’ve had. That’s why I made such a late decision,” Jake said. “It was a great opportunity that came up. Everyone was super supportive and I thought it’d be a good chance to take. I love the game of football. Coming to Penn State and being on this team and playing for such an amazing coaching staff, I am very excited for this opportunity.”

Jake got on campus recently and immediately went to work with the Nittany Lions.

“Summer is for workouts and getting bigger in the weight room, just being with the team and the coaches and getting mentally prepared for camp in the fall,” Jake said. “We’re not on the field a million hours a day. It’s just a lot of strength and conditioning.”

Jake, who is living in an apartment on campus with some of his new teammates, begins summer classes July 1. He plans to major in Finance.

“I am in an apartment with a couple other football guys. It’s been great. The guys are cool,” he said. “They gave us a really nice spot next to the facility. It’s a very nice apartment.”

Jake is looking forward to focusing on the defensive side of the ball at Penn State.

“Throughout high school, being the quarterback, I was always more of an offensive guy. But, I have always liked playing defense,” he said. “I could never fully devote all of my energy to defense. Just having the chance to focus on defense is a different mindset. It’s something exciting that I am ready to learn.”

He’s looking forward to Heise coming to campus, too. A member of the Erie Times-News All-District 10 football team, Heise is not playing football at Penn State, though. The Oil City

salutatorian will pursue a degree in data sciences and hopes to become a sports analyst for a professional football team.

“He’ll start in the fall. But right when I got here, he was here for orientation. I got to see him, which was nice,” Jake said. “I can’t wait for Steven to come up here. I am super excited to hang out with him. We’ve never actually lived in the same town before, so it’ll be exciting to get him up here.”