

By Brian Linder

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Ethen Knox might just be the biggest thing to happen to Oil City since the Rockefellers stopped coming to town.

You might even say “since oil,” but Oil City High football coach Dan York is quick to point out that industry remains to some degree.

“We still have a working oil well,” York said. “It was one of the first oil wells in creation.”

Edwin Drake was the first to drill in 1859, and Oil City bloomed as big oil moved in, peaking with a population of just more than 22,000 in 1930. There has been a steady decline since — by the 90s companies such as Pennzoil, Quaker State and Wolf’s Head, who once had headquarters there, had packed up and left — and today just more than 9,000 folks call the place home.

“We had a bunch of rich guys living here starting back in the mid-1800s,” York said. “But then they all eventually left and went to Texas.”

A town can tumble right on into obscurity when the very industry it was built on — its foundation — fades and the money dries up. And in the 30-plus years since the mega companies moved away things have certainly died down in Oil City. But the place put on the map by black gold back in the day has found its way back into the national discussion this fall thanks to Knox and one of the finest football seasons this country has ever seen.

When the 6-foot-1, 195-pound junior running back steps on the field Friday for the Oilers (7-2) in their playoff opener at Titusville against Slippery Rocky (5-4), he will do so as the nation’s leading rusher with 3,352 yards and 37 touchdowns.

That would be a talker all by itself, but the yardage number alone is not why the headlines keep popping up all over. It’s the pace, the context — the fact this quiet kid without a college offer has already obliterated a record held by one of the best runners on the planet, Derrick Henry — that has folks far and wide keeping an eye on every Oilers game.

“Honestly ....” big senior offensive lineman Cam Crocker said. “It has been something ... unreal.”

### **‘This never really crossed my mind’**

Ethen Knox grew up in Oil City, played for the Little Drillers starting in the fourth grade, and did just about everything you can do there along the way.

Ask him about all the activities the town has to offer, though, and he can’t help but laugh a little.

“Oh man ... that is a tough one,” he said. “There are a ton of parks so if me and my friends wanted to play basketball or something we could always do that. And there are things to do that are not necessarily in Oil City, but in some of the other towns ... maybe like 10 minutes away.”

Knox obviously loves his hometown though so he is sure to throw in a little damage control.

“There is stuff here to do,” he said. “You just have to put your mind to it.”

There is a big-time benefit to a small town with little to do when you are a successful high school football program. Folks turn out, in droves, on Friday nights. And the Oilers have won three district titles since 2016, so there have been some good times under York, who is about as old school — the guy doesn’t own a cell phone, and talks about running a Tom Osborne-inspired offense in a time when everyone else is spreading things out and going “RPO” crazy — as they come.

“It’s a great community, honestly,” Knox said. “Everybody really supports us, and the turnout for our games is just awesome.”

And when you are the star of the biggest show in town, and don’t think too much of it, it is easy to be caught off guard. Like the time, just a couple weeks ago, when Knox finished pumping a tank full of gas, hopped in his ride with the window down, and found himself staring into the face of a complete stranger.

“This guy pulls up next to me,” Knox said. “I didn’t know who he was, but he knew me, and he just told me that he comes to all the games with his sons and that they thought I was a great player and that I was having a great season.

“I thought that was really cool.”

There were kids in town — York laughs a little when it is brought up — who dressed up as Ethen Knox for Halloween.

“He has had to go sign some autographs for some of those elementary school kids, too,” the coach said. “That’s something I think is really special.”

The kids might want to hang onto those autographs for a while.

High school records can be tough to pin down. Games sometimes run late into the night, in rain, sleet and snow, with volunteers punching in numbers. Stuff gets lost. Things get missed and mixed up. That is how amazing performances become legend with little evidence outside of word of mouth to back them up, and why figuring out any national record is almost always a “best guess” affair. Some of that certainly applies here, but [MaxPreps.com](https://www.maxpreps.com) is one of the few sites in the country which has tackled the task of trying to track down such things, and it has attempted to apply perspective to Knox’s season thus far. According to the site, he is one of only three high school running backs in history to have surpassed 3,000 yards in just nine games. The majority of high school running backs in the country won’t rush for 400 yards this season.

Knox has done it *six* times this year, shattering the national record of four which previously belonged to Henry, the former Heisman Trophy winner and current Tennessee Titans star.

He is averaging 372.4 yards per game, too, which means that with a decent playoff run this year, he could surpass South Williamsport running back Dominick Bragalone's single-season state record of 4,704 yards.

He already claimed his school's all-time rushing record this year, in just his second season as a starter, with another year to go.

"I definitely wasn't expecting any of this," Knox said. "I can't lie. I'd love to say this was something I saw coming, but I definitely didn't think I'd be breaking any school records or national records.

"This never really crossed my mind."

### **'He is dog meat tough'**

York might have envisioned it to some extent.

He has coached some talented backs — just a few seasons ago another Oil City runner, Christian Cole, went for more than 3,000 in a season — so he knows a good one when he sees him. And York said that, despite the fact that Knox was playing defensive end and receiver as a freshman, the guy caught his eye.

And the coach said he went to work getting Knox to run track.

"He ran 11.8 in the 100 as a freshman, and that was good," York said. "So, we said, 'OK, Ethen, as a sophomore your goal is to run 11.5,' and next season rolls around and he hits 11.2. So ... OK, now we have something."

The goal now, York said, is 10.8, and he thinks Knox is going to hit that.

"The kid lifts every day before basketball practice, and there is hardly any fat on him," York said. "He's a mentally tough kid, too. You know, some of the games, we have given him 40 carries, and he plays safety, too, and has six interceptions. So, conditioning wise, he is never tired. He is tops there."

Ask York about this offense, and he will talk about the struggles to throw the football. That, he said, has been a key in this story, too. The Oilers have had to lean on Knox.

Forty carries? He got 54 three weeks ago against Conneaut, and didn't blink an eye.

"A lot of times, I don't even realize how many carries I got or how many yards I ran for until someone tells me after the game," Knox said. "It's not something I notice during the game."

"He is," York said, "dog meat tough."

## **'He can run with the big boys'**

The stories tracking Knox's amazing season never fail to reach social media, and that is where the side discussion always begins.

Folks can't understand how a guy putting up numbers like this does not have a college offer yet. The size seems to be good enough, and the film backs up the numbers. He has the frame, good vision, some strength, and a good enough burst to break off the big gainer.

"I think he can for sure compete at the top level," Crocker, who has a couple college offers of his own, said. "I think he can run with the big boys. He has what it takes to get to the next level."

The big question — and, perhaps, the holdup with offers — may be just where Knox might fit at the next level. Because as special as this season has been, his build and ability may actually translate better to the defensive side in college.

"I think he will probably be a defensive back," York said. "We think next year he could get to 210 pounds, and I think he would be a great free safety or outside linebacker for someone myself."

Ask Knox about it, and he will talk about this season, and this team. Ask him about it again, and he insists he is playing it cool.

"I'm excited," he said. "I've been getting more looks because of all this. I'm still waiting on the offers, but I'm just trusting the process. That's how I look at it. Just keep trusting in the process."

If there are any doubters, though, he need only put them on the phone with the big fella.

"Look ... it's insane," Crocker said. "When it comes to Ethen, I think the most special thing about him is just how humble he is. He puts up these crazy numbers, and then he comes back and tells everybody that it wasn't even him. He tells them it was the boys up front.

"But you know what? He is the one putting up the crazy numbers," he continued. "It's him. He's just an outstanding running back and anybody would be lucky to have this guy on their team."

An outstanding running back who dreams of someday being a teacher and a football coach, too. An outstanding running back who has put Oil City on the map, again, and might own the greatest single season in Pa. history — one of the best this country has ever seen — by the time the playoffs are through.

This is the stuff of legend.

So, no matter how this ends, it has been a season that Oil City, the Oilers and Ethen Knox will be talking about for years to come.

"I just hope that I can be able to look back at all of this one day and be able to reminisce," Knox said. "I'd love to be able to look back at all these stories and newspaper clippings someday, and

just take the time to sit down and think about how it all went, and about how fun all of this has been.

“I’m glad that I have had the season I have had,” he continued, “and I’m happy about how it has all went with the team and these guys.”