

By Joe Sager

Derrick correspondent/Jan. 22, 2025

ERIE – The first semester in college can be overwhelming for many freshmen.

Not for Ethen Knox.

The Oil City graduate made the jump from high school football to Mercyhurst University in the fall for the program's first season at the NCAA Division I level.

"It was good. It went really well and better than I expected, actually," Knox said. "I got some things under my belt now and I am feeling pretty confident."

By design, Knox's on-field opportunities were limited. He appeared in just one game for the Lakers (4-7). But, he made the most of his chance toting the ball. The running back rushed for a team-high 76 yards and a touchdown in a 66-0 win over Lincoln University.

"It was definitely a great opportunity to get in a game like that and show what I am capable of doing and how I play," he said. "It was definitely a good experience."

Mercyhurst, which emphasized a passing attack last season, hopes that performance offered a glimpse of what is to come. At Oil City, Knox became District 10's all-time leading rusher with 7,870 yards. His junior season put him on a bigger scale when he surpassed 400 yards rushing in six games to break the national record held by 2015 Heisman Award winner and four-time Pro Bowler Derrick Henry.

In order to preserve a season of his college eligibility, Knox didn't appear in any other games and took a redshirt. So, he'll be able to compete for the Lakers for four more seasons.

“I definitely didn’t want to burn my redshirt on a season where I wasn’t getting any serious reps,” he said. “So, it’s good to maintain that and play an extra year.”

Though game experience was limited, enduring a season at the D-I level was invaluable for Knox. He got the chance to travel with the team on the road, too.

“The first couple weeks here, I didn’t travel. But, we had some injuries among the running backs later in the year, so I got to travel to some of the road games,” he said. “It was pretty awesome to get that under my belt now. I went to Central Connecticut State, which was a pretty brutal bus ride. But, it was fun staying in a hotel and going through the routine. It was nice seeing how road games function.”

Mercyhurst surprised many last April when it announced it was moving up from the NCAA D-II level to D-I and joining the Northeast Conference. The program will go through another provisional season next fall before it can compete for an NEC title in 2026.

“Coming from the PSAC, it was a completely different conference for us and we didn’t know how a lot of these teams really were,” Knox said. “You can watch film all you want, but you have to play them to really understand.”

The Lakers earned their first conference and D-I victory with a 21-20 season-ending triumph over Saint Francis. They used a hook-and-ladder for a go-ahead two-point conversion and had a strip sack in the closing seconds to secure the win.

“That was just a great win. That was exciting. I think everyone was up on their feet for that one,” Knox said. “We practiced really hard leading into that game and we played a great four quarters on offense, defense and special teams. That game just showed how

we can play if we put all the pieces together, and got a lot of guys excited for next season.”

The team finished 4-7, but closed the year with two wins, including the Saint Francis victory.

“We had a challenging schedule. We had D-I opponents and had some D-II and D-III opponents,” Knox said. “I felt it was a learning year for a lot of guys to get adjusted to playing better competition, so we can come out swinging against the best teams.”

In addition to all the on-field football knowledge, Knox found out it’s important to listen to his body.

“I definitely learned your body is taking a beating, so you definitely need to get to the trainers for work and get physical therapy treatment if you’re hurt,” he said. “Rest and recovery are some of the most-important aspects. Without doing that, you’d be so much worse off.”

Also off the field, Knox adjusted well to his academic load. A cyber security major, he posted strong results during his first semester.

“School has been good. It’s definitely an adjustment coming from high school,” he said.

“It was all about finding time to do my homework outside of school, but I was able to figure it out. I had a 3.8 GPA in the fall. It was challenging to balance it, but I think I handled it pretty well.”

Now, Knox and the Lakers are preparing for spring practices.

“We already started lifting and our conditioning work will start next week,” he said. “I am focusing on mainly stuff that I have been working on — speed, agility, strength and

overall power while running with the football. Also, I want to make sure I can get a good feel for the playbook. Spring ball is a great opportunity to get my mind wrapped around the playbook because it can be a challenge during the season.”

Knox has embraced the challenge of earning more playing time this fall, but understands it’s a process.

“Coming out of last season, I feel really confident going into this offseason that I can train hard and get myself onto the field more. Now is the time to focus on putting in the work, so next season, it can actually pay off,” he said. “It’s tiresome sometimes. If you love the game, it makes it easy, though. Playing with your brothers, you get pretty close with during the season. We’re all putting in the work together, which makes it a lot more fun. I am just trying to soak up everything so I can get better.”