

With His Career as a Running Back In the Past, Jeremiah Knight Is Catching On

by Marcel Ulrich • April 19, 2019 • ZipsNation.org

When Jeremiah Knight arrived on the University of Akron campus in the summer of 2018 his entrance went almost completely under the radar. This, despite being a 1st team all-state high school running back with 4-year rushing numbers of 5,800 yards and 65 TD's. And a senior campaign that resulted in 200 carries for 2,223 yards and 25 touchdowns. How did a player with such a storybook career sneak into Summit County unknown to even the most fervent of Zips' fans? Said former Zips head coach Terry Bowden last season, as Knight began making an increasing impact on the Zips special teams - "No one really recruited him too hard out of high school, because everyone thought he was going to Ohio State."

And indeed, that's where his college career began.

Buckeye Beginnings

A 2017 graduate of Ashtabula's Jefferson Area High School, Knight originally accepted an offer to become a preferred walk-on at Ohio State. "Being from Ohio, Ohio State was always my dream school," said Knight. "I always really liked Akron. I came on some visits here and Akron was definitely in the mix, but when I got my opportunity at Ohio State it was something I had to try. I wanted to go there."

His first few weeks of practice in Columbus progressed better than expected, and the versatile running back/return man had expectations to crack the Buckeye's special team's lineup as a true freshman.

Then things changed. "I'd played running back my whole life," explained Knight. "I started as a running back at Ohio State when, about three weeks in to fall camp, we were running team offense and I made a cutback. My leg gave out. It hurt a little bit, but didn't swell up or anything. A couple days later I was back at practice. But there was still a little weird feeling, so I ended up getting an MRI and found out my ACL was torn. Nothing else was injured, so I think it might have been torn back in high school."



Following surgery, the recovery process began. And with it, he seriously began mulling some changes. First, at his position, and then his school.

“After I got my surgery I talked to my (Ohio State) coaches,” said Knight. “Long term, as a running back, I knew going up against linebackers wouldn’t be the best for me. I felt I’d eventually move to wide receiver because it fits my attributes, and my size, I’m only around 5’ 10”, 195 pounds, better. I began sitting-in with the receivers at practice, even though I couldn’t practice yet, and started learning. I’ve always been the quickest on the field. But not the speediest. I’m not a 4.3, 4.4 guy (in the 40 yard dash)...I’m more like a 4.5. I’m not going to be able to out-run everybody.”



At a Power 5 football program like Ohio State, where 4- and 5-star high school seniors are routinely *turned down* for scholarships, the writing was on the wall that a preferred walk-on with an ACL tear was going to struggle for playing time. Said Knight, “I began thinking I could be more effective at a MAC school. And I’d have the chance to play right away. So after spring ball I got my release and I sent it to all the MAC schools. One of the coaches from the previous Akron staff, Kory Gribbin (TE coach) hit me up about six days after spring ball had ended. I wanted to get the process moving pretty quickly because I didn’t want to miss out on summer workouts, so I came in for a visit in May, and made my decision the day after. By late June I was working out with the team.” And, immersing himself in the process of becoming a wide receiver.

The Transition

While making the switch from high school running back to Division 1 college receiver is daunting, this Akron Zip received inspiration from an unlikely source, a former Kent State QB. “Who do I model my game after? For sure, as soon as I became a slot receiver, it was Julian Edelman, all the way. I liked how he went to Kent State as a quarterback, and didn’t play any receiver until he got to the NFL. When I made the back-to-receiver transition I said ‘If he can do that with no college experience, I can do it with no high school experience. I really watch him, and focus my game around him. I do the drills he did ... I like to break his film down and try to be like him.’”

Offering insight into his newfound position outside the tackles, Knight added “The hardest thing is, all those years you build your football knowledge based upon a running back’s perspective. The blocking, the routes, the cutting. At receiver, it’s all different. You have to be more patient. You’re always in the open field, one-on-one instead of having to read the defense.”





The Film Room

While inspiration can certainly be drawn from someone like Edelman, who's traveled a similar path, the work required both off and on the field to make such a transition successful, is all on the player. Says Knight, "I watch film every single day. We watch it as a team before practice or before our walkthroughs or lifts. I don't go home. I made a promise to myself that I wouldn't go home until after study tables are done, which is at night. I'm here between classes, I'll watch tape of the previous practice over and over again. I'll usually get one of the assistant coaches and we'll sit down and watch it together. I really try to encourage other players to join, but we're all on different schedules, so it's tough sometimes. But whether we get one or eight guys, we'll sit together and break it down. During the day I'll watch the team film, and then late at night I'll breakdown the film of NFL receivers."

Continuous Improvement

Beyond film study, attention to detail and dedication to drills are required to become an elite MAC wide-out. "Playing running back, my strength has always been there," said Knight. "At receiver, you don't need to be as strong, so I know I just need to maintain strength. I really focus on speed. When I got here my forty yard dash time was in the high 4.5's, now I'm in the low 4.5's, maybe high 4.4's. I do footwork drills every single day. Coach Pearson also worked with me a lot this off season to improve my top end speed. That'll help me get open on the deeper routes this fall. I also work on my hand-eye coordination. I do 1,000 tennis ball reps a day, catch bricks, and then I catch 150 JUGS every single day. That's all really important to me because, no matter how open you get, you can't be a great receiver if you can't catch the ball."

Regarding his best attribute as a receiver, Knight said "My quickness has always been really good. So I like to get low, get quick with my feet. I'm really good at bursting...slowing it back down and then bursting again. So my quickness at the top of the routes is what helps me get separation."

The 2019 Receiver Corps

Losing only two seniors from last season (Kwadarrius Smith and Mykel Traylor-Bennett) the 2019 Zips receivers are young, but stacked. All underclassman, the talented group of Jeremiah "Boogie" Knight (yes, we'll address the nickname later), Nate Stewart, Dre Williams, Jonah Morris, Malik Wooldridge, Dustin Burkhart and Tim Scippio have all had game experience and time to bond. "I've never been closer to anybody in my life," says Knight. "We got really close last year. We do everything together. We hang out, we're in meetings all the time. We just feel like brothers. We always compete. We have so much talent, and every day we're pushing each other to get better. We're always happy for each other. You never see anyone getting greedy with the reps. If someone makes a play, the whole team goes to congratulate them."

And while the 2018 Zips offense was often described as "predictable," that adjective has been replaced in 2019 by "versatile." "We want to be versatile, so it won't matter if me, Jonah, Nate, Dustin, Dre or Malik are in, we know we can count on everyone to make the plays."



A Special Player

Knight, who wears #82, will most-certainly impact the Zips offense at wide receiver over the next three seasons. But his work on special teams is equally, if not more important. The role of return man is one Knight relishes. “My goal is to always be a punt returner/kick returner,” he said. “This staff is really big on guys playing their part, not just on offense and defense, but on special teams, because special teams absolutely does win games. I know that. I played a big role on special teams last year and I really enjoy it. I know that’s going to be my job and I want to be the best I can at it.”

Who’ll be helping him on the returns this season? “On punts I think it will be me and Featherstone, but we haven’t done too much with punt returns this spring. On kick returns it’ll be me and Alvin Davis.”

Knight then offered some insights regarding the art of punt returning. “You really have to focus on the way the ball comes off the foot. The rotation of the ball tells you where it’s going. When it’s windy, the ball can either carry, or die-out. You have to recognize the rotation quickly so you can set up under it and get square. The catch is tough ... if you don’t have your elbows tight, the ball will slide right through.”

While ball spin recognition and body positioning technique are important, it takes a unique player to focus on that while eleven opposing players are sprinting down the field, all with the intent to separate you from the ball.

“I’ve always had a good awareness,” said Knight. “You can feel a presence. I always take a look when the ball’s about halfway between the kicker and me, a quick glance to get a visual of who-is-where. By watching film you know the speed of the gunners. If they’re still on the block 10 yards out, you’ll have some time. But sometimes they get a free release and get down pretty quick. Then, you just have to fair catch it.”

Three Head Coaches in Eight Months

If the changes in school and position weren’t enough, in December 2018 Knight found himself playing for his 3rd head coach in a span of eight months (Urban Meyer, Terry Bowden and Tom Arth). Says Knight of the coaching carousel – “It is different. It’s tough. But to be honest every time there’s a change it seems like it

gets better. When I went to Ohio State I liked the staff, and when I first came here, I enjoyed the staff. But I absolutely love this staff. Coach Gasser, Coach Arth, they're really a good fit for me because I'm a big football-knowledge guy. I really look up to the Patriots, and Coach Arth loves the Patriots, so I really feel like we're always on the same page. I think this staff has been the best fit for me."

Knight recalled his initial encounter with Coach Arth, one that created a good first impression. "I was in the locker room after a workout, maybe two or three days after he was hired. He and a couple other coaches came in. I'd heard a lot of good things about him since he's from the area, and used coach in the area. He was just observing...looking to see what he could do to make the locker room better for the players. I knew right away he was going to be a great coach."

When asked about his future goals, Knight provided both short, and long term targets. "My main goal is – I want to get 1,000 yards this year. That's what I'm working and shooting for. But at the end of the day, whether it's me getting 1,000 yards, or Nate, or anybody else, as long as our receiver group is producing and we're winning games, I'm happy. My career goal is to be the all-time leading receiver at Akron."

While not something tangible, like yards or wins, Knight then stressed another area where he hopes to grow as he enters his redshirt sophomore season. "It's important to me to be a leader on our team. To make sure everyone is doing their part in helping us win."

The Coolest Nickname in College Sports

Referred to as Jeremiah Knight in the Zips Media Guide, his birth certificate may be the only other documentation of his given first name. He's always been "Boogie." "'Boogie' has been my nickname my whole life," said Knight. "It started in youth football when I was 5 or 6 years old. I was always very quick. My parents gave me the name and it stuck. If there's an option, I prefer 'Boogie,' but at the end of the day either Jeremiah or Boogie is fine."

A Breakout Season Awaits

All indications point to the Zips offense reaching exciting, new heights in 2019. Redshirt junior quarterback Kato Nelson is entering the prime of his college career. Former NFL quarterback Tom Arth is molding the Zips offense. And with four dangerous wide-outs on the field at any given time, opposing defenses will be kept honest.

The quiet, unassuming start to the career of Jeremiah "Boogie" Knight is complete, and his ascent to becoming a force in the MAC, and a fan favorite at the corner of Exchange and Brown streets, has begun. If you like electric, worth-the-price-of-admission players, come check out the Zips and Boogie Knight this fall.

'Cause Boogie Knight's, as everyone knows, are always the best in town.

