



Brayden Crocker leads interference for Sean Stack in this 2020 game.

(This story originally appeared in the Jan. 18, 2022, edition of The Derrick and The News-Herald.)

He appeared destined to be one of the all-time greats around here: all-state linebacker in football maybe, state champion wrestler very possibly – and probably even both.

But fate has not been not kind to Brayden Crocker, and the gifted Oil City High School athlete is in the midst of a senior year unable to participate in sports at all.

Knee injuries did him in – and both knees, too – all leading up to four surgeries since his sophomore year.

“I’ve never seen a high school kid have so many setbacks,” said Dustin Wenner, his wrestling coach at Cranberry.

What’s more, as recently as Jan. 4, Brayden and his family were told by Dr. Jim Bradley, the Steelers orthopedic surgeon, that if he wanted to still be walking by the age of 40, to *slow* it down big time when it came to contact sports. Better to take up golf or cycling, he was told.

And so ended a high school athletic career that began with so much promise.

Freshman year, 2018-19

Second team all-region linebacker in football after making 122 tackles for the Oilers' first of three straight District 10 championship teams. That total ranks No. 2 since the 1990s behind safety Kris Tawney's 128 in 2002.

"Size, strength, speed. He studies film. He's good at reading keys and getting to the football. That's why he had all those tackles his freshman year," said Oil City football coach Dan York.

He also showed a spark on offense, catching an 83-yard touchdown pass from Holden Stahl against General McLane. That would be one of four touchdowns, two rushing and two receiving, covering 80 yards or more during his career.

That winter, the ninth-grader, competing at 195 pounds for the Cranberry/Oil City co-op, would reach the Class AA state quarterfinals before being eliminated in the wrestle-backs. He finished the season with a 30-4 record, all four losses coming to state place-winners, and at least one of them a state champion.

Breaking Paul Zacherl's school record for victories (124) seemed a shoo-in – as did winning a state title or two or three. "Oh my goodness, yes," Wenner said. "He's one of the most talented wrestlers I've ever coached, and he works so hard... He's a freak of nature."

"I always wanted to be a state champion in everything I did, and I always tried to achieve that," Crocker said. But that 30-4 mark as a freshman would turn out to be his final career stat.

Sophomore year, 2019-20

First team all-region linebacker and second team tight end in football after catching four passes for 158 yards, including a school record 90-yarder from Stahl against Ft. LeBoeuf. Crocker also ran for 406 yards when he was playing fullback with TD runs of 80 yards against Slippery Rock and then 90 against McLane in the first round of the playoffs.

However, that McLane game also marked the beginning of the end of Crocker's career as he went down with knee injury No. 1. "That *HURT*," he said, ranking the injuries. "That was the worst one, actually."

While the Oilers would go on to beat Meadville and Hollidaysburg before losing to Southern Lehigh in the playoffs, Crocker would go under the knife and begin rehab after sustaining ACL and meniscus injuries that not only caused him to miss those games but the wrestling season. Still, he had no doubt that he would be ready for his junior season in both sports. "Absolutely," he said.

Junior year, 2020-21

First team all-region linebacker again and second team on offense, this time as an "all-purpose" back. Later he was named to the Erie Times-News Big School All-District 10 team at linebacker as the Oilers stretched their school record regular season unbeaten streak. A coach at a rival

school referred to Crocker on Twitter as maybe the best linebacker in the state. But as Oil City was battering Conneaut in their first playoff game, Crocker went down again with another ACL/meniscus injury.

So he missed the Oilers' romp over Harbor Creek for their third straight District 10 crown, their thrilling playoff victories against Juniata and Upper Moreland and their not-so-thrill loss to eventual state champion Thomas Jefferson as well as a second straight wrestling season.

In the meantime, he was getting looks from such Mid-American Conference schools as Akron, Toledo and Miami of Ohio along with Marshall for football. Even Pitt showed a bit of interest, Crocker said. And York said he got a couple of calls from Penn State asking about him.

But he got no offers, and Crocker suspects the injuries were the reason why.

Senior year (2021-present)

Still, he planned to play football and wrestle again for his senior season. Football, especially defense, was his first love, after all.

But over the summer Clarion, an NCAA Division I school in wrestling, made a scholarship offer even though he hadn't been on the mat since his freshman year.

"I did think (playing college) football until I got the offer from Clarion," Crocker said.

So after two knee surgeries, the 6-0, 226-pounder decided to give up football and leave behind his 280 career tackles, 13 sacks, 19 tackles for loss, 488 yards rushing (10-plus yards per carry) and 319 yards receiving (40 yards a catch) and places on Oil City's various all-time lists.

Oil City coaches were disappointed. "He had absolutely unlimited potential," York said. "It's just a shame."

Crocker had two more "cleanup" surgeries, one, as it turns out, the first week of football practice.

Still, he was counting on a senior year of wrestling after working hard on Wenner's farm and at the Regional Training Center at Clarion over the summer to get ready. The Berries even beefed up their schedule in anticipation of his return – not to mention Wenner figured the competition would do his younger wrestlers a lot of good.

But Brayden was hurt again in pre-season. And that was that – although the Berries will include him on Senior Night, which for now is planned Jan. 25 against Sheffield.

"(Giving up wrestling) was heart-breaking because I gave up football. They were the only sports I had," the former Pennsylvania Junior Wrestling gold medalist said. Crocker had played football since fourth grade and started wrestling at age 3. "My dad (Mike) took me to high school practices (when Oil City still had its own team) because he was the coach."

Crocker family: 11 knee surgeries

The latest knee surgery upped the Crocker family count to an astounding 11. His dad had six and his brother, Cam, who will be a senior lineman and four-year starter for the Oilers in the fall, had one in eighth grade.

To make up for the loss of participating, Brayden has helped out with the Oil City football and Cranberry wrestling teams and landed a job at the Y where he's taken up lifting.

"Clarion has been real good with him and says if he feels good (to) pop into the RTC next year and test the waters...See where it goes from there," his dad said.

Brayden will enroll at Venango Campus after he graduates from OCHS to begin eight more years of schooling to become a nurse anesthetist. That's four years to earn a bachelor's degree, two years working in a hospital and two more years of school to (layman's term here) learn how to put patients to sleep.

That his parents Mike (teacher) and Missy (physical therapist/healthcare) have biology backgrounds piqued his interest in becoming an anesthetist, but there's another little thing. "Having the surgeries made up my mind that that's what I wanted to do," he said.