

Windy City Mo-Joe

The Tragedy of Johnny Knox

Published: 2/19/13

You can't teach speed. You also can't teach determination. Johnny Knox, former wide receiver for the Chicago Bears, had a boatload of both. By utilizing these innate abilities, Knox transformed himself from a junior college walk-on to a 24-year-old rising star in the NFL.

Then came December 18th, 2011.

Just under four minutes into a game against the Seattle Seahawks, Knox caught a third down pass over the middle.

While Knox fought for extra yardage, Seahawks safety Kam Chancellor laid a hit on him to force a fumble.

Knox dove for the ball. So did 285-pound defensive tackle Anthony Hargrove.

The resulting hit bent Knox so far backwards that his helmet nearly touched his right calf.

Knox lay motionless as the play came to an end with Seattle recovering the fumble. Soldier Field was in stunned silence after witnessing what appeared to be an illusion.

The fact that he wasn't paralyzed by the hit was nothing short of a miracle. But the resulting diagnosis wasn't much better. Knox suffered a thoracic-lumbar joint fracture-dislocation with severe nerve damage.

In layman's terms: a broken back which required immediate spinal fusion surgery. Now a man who once had the ability to run a sub 4.4-second 40-yard dash is lucky to just be able to walk.

After being on the Physically Unable to Perform (PUP) list for the entire 2012 season, the Bears terminated Knox's contract last Tuesday, Feb. 12. The next day, Knox officially announced his retirement.

Considering how hard Knox fought just to keep his football dream alive, there isn't another player in the NFL more undeserving of a premature exit from the league.

Coming out of high school in Channelview, Texas, Knox was a first-team all-state selection at wide receiver. But apparently, no Division I coaches saw any potential in him. The same goes for coaches from Division II and Division III.

Knox thought he might catch on at the junior college level. After searching for schools with openings at wide receiver, he traveled nearly 700 miles from Houston to Hutchinson Junior College in Kansas to speak with Head Coach Craig Jersild about a possible scholarship.

Jersild wouldn't even come out of his office to talk to him.

Undeterred, Knox regrouped and prepared for a talent showcase at Blinn College, the junior college version of the NFL Combine, or showcase of athletes.

The coaches who attend give each prospect a ranking, with the highest rank being a "1." Knox received a "3."

"He wasn't anything that jumped off the page," Ryan Mahon, offensive coordinator at Tyler Community College told the Chicago Daily Herald. At a crossroads like this, most athletes would take the hint and pack it up. Knox kept searching.

Knox finally caught a break from a small community college in Tyler, Texas.

After a mediocre freshman season, he led all junior college receivers, with 837 receiving yards and 11 touchdowns in his sophomore year.

His gaudy stats only earned him one recruiting visit. Abilene Christian University, a Division II program, was the only team willing to give him a shot.

Knox quickly rose from a reserve to the team's primary receiver. What he accomplished over his two seasons as a Wildcat was historic: 118 receptions, 2,227 yards and 30 touchdowns.

But even multiple school records and second-team All American honors weren't enough to put Knox on any NFL team's draft radar.

Most scouts thought his numbers were skewed by the weaker competition at the Division II level. It took him a standout performance at the Texas vs. The Nation All Star Game to even secure a spot at the 2009 NFL Combine.

When Knox arrived in Indianapolis for the Combine, he had to get scouts to notice him so he might get another shot to prove himself in private team workouts.

After blazing through the 40-yard dash in 4.34 seconds, the third fastest time recorded at the Combine, all 32 NFL teams had no choice but to notice Knox.

Knox had the type of straight-line speed that any team covets — speed that could blow the top off of defenses on deep routes and could prove to be lethal in the return game.

Come April's NFL Draft, Knox's improbable dream became a reality. The Chicago Bears selected him in the fifth round as the 140th overall pick.

He'd have to continue to prove himself to the Bears. Former Bears General Manager Jerry Angelo called the pick "risky" and said Knox had a 50/50 shot at making the final roster in 2009.

No stranger to adversity, Knox put together a preseason that proved he belonged in the NFL by hauling in five catches for 127 yards in limited playing time.

His speed made him a viable option as a slot receiver, and he was able to snag 45 passes for 527 yards and five touchdowns in his rookie season.

He was equally effective as a kick returner alongside Devin Hester, racking up 927 return yards, a kick return touchdown and a Pro Bowl appearance for his special teams efforts.

In 2010, he led the Bears in both receiving yards with 960 and with five touchdowns.

He took a bit of a step back in 2011, but still averaged nearly 19 yards per catch as the Bears' number one receiving option.

And then, in the blink of an eye, it was all gone. After putting in years of arduous work at the lowest levels just to prove his worth, his career would come to a screeching halt in less than three full seasons in the league.

This is not the way the underdog story is supposed to end. A one-in-a-million type injury is not supposed to happen to someone with that strong of a character and that much resiliency.

That's why to Bears fans, losing Knox feels different than losing any other player to injury.

Knox was a fan favorite in this town not just for his play, but for his humility.

He proved everything through old-fashioned hard work and never rested on his laurels.

Knox embodied the very spirit of this city: to never take no for an answer, to never give up on your dreams.

His potential was limitless, but now we will never know just how great he could have become.