

Jim Merritts

Slow start at UConn served as springboard to WVU

By JIM GREGORY

Everyone can point to a moment in their life that changes their life forever.

Jim Merritts is no different. Merritts suffered what he thought was a career-ending knee injury on the first play of his first collegiate game at the University of Connecticut.

"I wasn't even sweating yet," he said. "My first game, first play against Army and I tear up my medial collateral ligament. I thought at that moment that my football career was over. It made me realize that college football wasn't going to put bread on my table."

But Merritts had worked so hard for his opportunity to play college football that changing his life's path was not going to be easy.

Jimmy, as his friends call him, started playing football in the fifth grade at the old Blair Elementary School in Hollidaysburg. By the seventh grade, Merritts remembers he wasn't always the best player on the field.

"I was six-feet tall by the seventh grade and weighed 135 pounds," he said. "I was always picked last for teams because I was still growing into my body. Because of my appearance, older kids thought I was their age and always wanted to challenge me...that made it tough growing up."

When Merritts entered high school, though, then Hollidaysburg Golden Tigers coach Tom Irwin knew he had something special.

"Jim had a gift to play football," Irwin, recently retired as Bishop Guilfoyle's head coach, said. "You could tell that from the moment he stepped on the field."

Harold Price, himself inducted into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame (Class of 2000), followed Irwin at Hollidaysburg and remembers fondly his days of coaching Merritts during the 1978 season.

"He was a dominant player both offensively and defensively," Price said. "He could impose his will on any player opposite him. He really helped our running game go."

But once his high school career was over, there weren't many opportunities to continue his career at the Division I level.

"Rutgers flew me out for a visit, but they didn't even offer me a scholarship so I ended up at UConn," he said. "I was excited to be playing football and getting my education paid for."

And after his knee injury, that education became the most important thing to Jim.

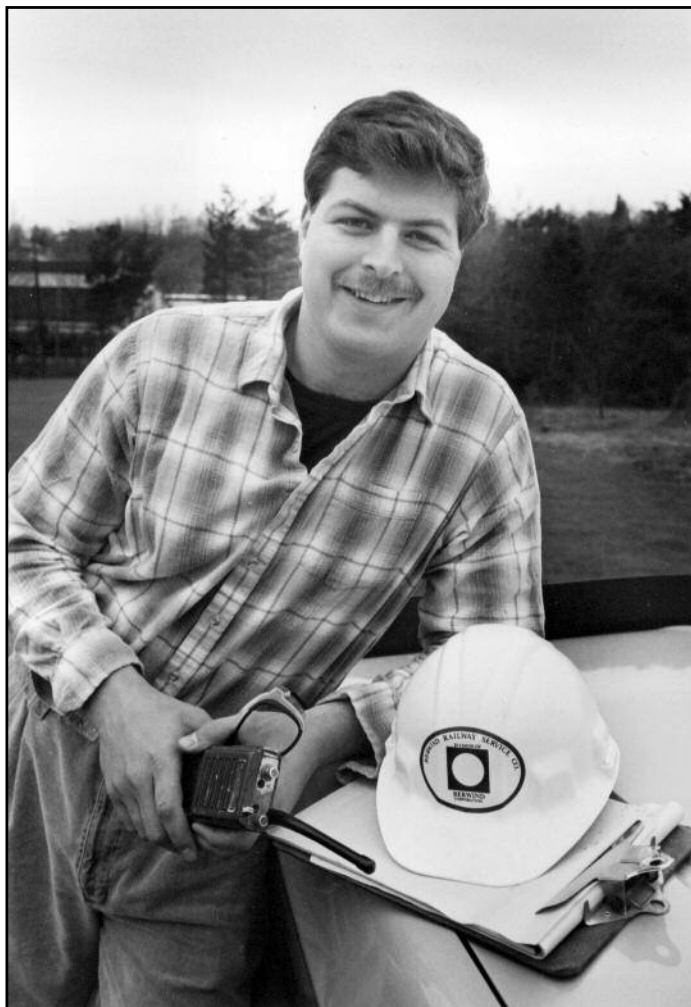
"I was majoring in Safety Management and there weren't many universities offering that program in the country," he said. Now that major is serving him well as a Safety Management Superintendent for the New York Transit Authority, where he has been working since 1997.

But before Jim started working in the "real world," as he called it, he didn't immediately let his knee injury at UConn end his football career.

"I came home to Altoona, skipped the 1981 season completely, to work my butt off to get my knee back in shape," he said.

But unfortunately the Huskies' coaching staff didn't recognize his hard work to come back. Merritts' memories of his sophomore year aren't fond.

"The coaches just seemed to single me out for plays that went wrong during practice," he said. "I didn't need that and left there but didn't know what I was going to do."



Jim traded in his helmet for another hard hat: He's now a safety inspector in New Jersey.

After taking some classes at Penn State Altoona, Jim tried to attract some attention from the Pitt Panthers through his relationship with Brad Benson (Blair County Sports Hall of Fame Class 1990).

"Then a friend of mine suggested West Virginia," he said. "I never thought of there, but I sent them my information and paid them a visit." Merritts ended up making the Mountaineers' team in 1982 but didn't immediately get a scholarship.

"Coach Nehlen said if I made the first or second team, he'd give me a scholarship," he said. "I made the second team at nose tackle in the spring but Coach told me he didn't have a scholarship for me. Then, right before the season started, Coach came to me and told me had a scholarship. I'll always remember him as a man of his word for that."

Nehlen remembers Merritts for his senior leadership during the 1983 season, a season that ended with a Mountaineer victory over Kentucky in the Hall of Fame Bowl. Merritts also graduated later that year with his all-important degree.

"He was one of those kids that had it," Nehlen said. "I never had to motivate Jim and he was an incredibly smart football player."

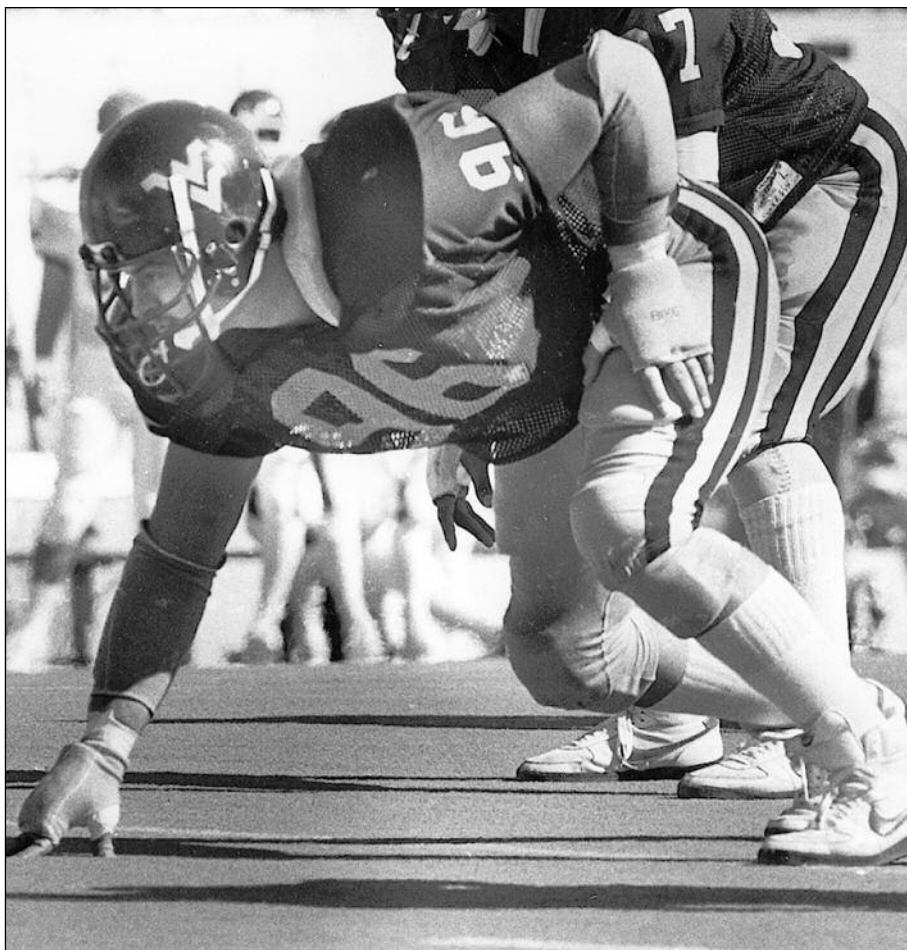
Merritts was also smart enough not to challenge Nehlen to a game in his other favorite sport, racquetball.

"I'd wax him," Nehlen said, laughing.

Merritts agreed, saying, "I might have been dumb, but I wasn't stupid. That was his sport."

The two still stay in touch periodically, and Merritts is glad to have Nehlen here as his presenter.

"He just taught me so much about work ethic and taking pride in what you do," he said. "He was a natural to be here to present me."



Jim helped the Mountaineers climb to No. 4 in the 1983 poll.



Merritts bio

Sport: Football.

Hometown: Hollidaysburg.

College: West Virginia.

Hall of Fame achievement:

Played for the Indianapolis Colts; WVU standout.

Current residence: Green Brooke, N.J.

injury didn't end my football career but it made me realize I had to be prepared for life after football."

And now that life has brought him here for induction into the Hall of Fame class of 2004.

He and his wife Karla live in Green Brook, N.J. with their two children (Kyle and Kelly), but Merritts' parents, Jim and Nancy, and siblings still live in the Hollidaysburg area.

"You always want to return home where your family and friends are," he said. "To me this is the ultimate and I want to thank everyone that helped me back home."

Merritts' football career didn't end in Morgantown.

His pro career included stops with the Cleveland Browns, who signed him as a free agent out of WVU, and the Indianapolis Colts, where he played four games during the 1987 season. He was with the Pittsburgh Maulers when the USFL disbanded, then he played parts of two seasons in the Canadian League with the Toronto Argonauts.

But he still thinks back to that September day in 1980, wearing a UConn Huskies' uniform when he thought his career was over.

"It just goes to show that you never know what life is going to bring you," he said. "That knee