

ONE WAY

Berry draws on faith to lead Warriors on & off field

BY ABBY HOOVEN

Faith, family and football are pillars in Blaze Berry's life.

All three are tightly intertwined, guiding Berry in his journey on and off the field.

The Eminence standout quarterback has already built an impressive resume in three years with the Warrior football program. During his junior season alone, he earned football district player of the year honors, was named an all-district and all-conference quarterback and earned KHSAA Academic All-State honors.

Individually, Berry has easily written himself into Eminence's history books. Yet, he is quick to turn the attention away from "me" to "we," giving credit to God, his teammates and coaches for putting him in a position to be successful.

"All glory to God. He's allowed me to do all the things that I've been able to do, and with a great group of guys behind me to motivate and push me each and every single day in the weight room, on the field and then also be there for me whenever I need help getting back up," said Berry. "Then, with a great coaching staff that we've been able to have behind us, has allowed everything to be possible."

In 2023, Berry's decision-making and passing precision allowed him to lead the state and rank fifth in the country, according to MaxPreps, in passing yards with 3567 total yards on 203 completions.

"My linemen were fantastic. My O-line allowed me to be able to throw and be protected each and every single game to stay healthy throughout the entire season. Without that, I wouldn't have any of the stats or recognitions that I was able to get," said Berry.

Berry's trust in his receivers, many of whom he'd played with for years, also contributed to his statistical feats.

"For receivers to go out there and run great routes, we worked on it all throughout the off-season," said Berry. "We know we have each other's backs, and we know that we can put the ball up and I can throw it to them and they're going to be there... it's fun to watch them go make plays."

His offensive performances, along with a new program culture in the works, helped the Warriors bounce back with a winning record after a losing 2022 season.

"The culture change has been extreme, and we've gone full force into our coaching staff and believing that they know what's best for us, and we believe it with our hearts," said Berry.

Motivated by a new "no minimum" mantra, Eminence is committed to going the extra mile in all aspects to continue to elevate the program.

Last season was a positive start, though. The Warriors earned seven wins, including five straight to open the year.

"After the very first win, I think we really felt like we had a special group of guys to do a special thing last year, and we kind of felt that the culture was changing and we could see ourselves turning away from what the past had been of Eminence football and turning to a new future and a new tomorrow," said Berry.

Ahead of his senior season, Berry remains committed to growing



Eminence quarterback Blaze Berry completes a pass to Landon Smither during the 2023 season. Berry led the state in passing yards as a junior.

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Blaze Berry's helmet is marked with his personal motto, "One Way," as a reminder to follow God's way.

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every facet of his game. Between weight sessions and practices with Eminence and training with QB Country Nashville, Berry continues to hone his craft to help the Warriors compete for a district title.

"Working out with the team is my main thing, because I want to be a team-first guy," said Berry. "But for my off-season, it looks more like quarterback developmental stuff, so I'll do extra exercises for my core, for my arm."

Building arm strength was vital to Berry's comeback after a season-ending wrist injury in 2022.

Berry sustained the injury within the first drive of the game against Frankfort during his sophomore season.

"We had a combo, we call it smash, I was rolling out, so I was on the run and I threw it to the back of the end zone and right as I threw it, I got hit in my back and I spun around and tried to catch myself with my hand," said Berry.

Initially, Berry, fueled by adrenaline, taped his wrist and continued playing, thinking it was a sprain or a slight bone break.

In reality, he was playing with a broken scaphoid bone in his wrist.

"You're not supposed to be able to grip anything if it's broken, and I wondered why my grip was so loose, but God gave me the strength to play and finish out the game and come close to being able to get it done," said Berry.

Berry underwent surgery and had a screw inserted into his wrist. He missed the final four games of the season but worked through therapy and additional rehab to return for a complete 2023 season.

"Most people don't know how mentally and physically challenging it was for him recovering from that injury, but that is Blaze. He has a love for the game of football, and he spent hours each week during the season, as well as in the offseason, working on his craft," said Eminence football head coach Ryan Jones.

While many might view an injury as a setback, Berry had quite a different outlook on the situation.

"It honestly has been a blessing in disguise from God. He allowed me to come back even stronger than I was before and allowed me to become a better quarterback because of it. I was able to study the game a lot more and watch it from a coach's and sideline perspective rather than being in the heat of the game, as well as coming back and having a whole new throwing motion, which has allowed me to become a better quarterback," said Berry.

The development of Berry's football IQ was on display throughout his junior season. While the defense took the field, Berry was often seen with the coaching staff analyzing schemes and making adjustments to better serve the offense.

His time away from the field as a sophomore assisted in some of his mental growth, but playing more on the field has been crucial as well.

"The time that I've been playing, I've been able to see things throughout my entire career, but these last couple off-seasons, I really started to do the mental part of the game," said Berry.

This spring, Berry was named to the Tom Leach All-Resiliency Team for his incredible comeback from injury and perse-

verance as he played throughout the season while attending a family health emergency.

Berry's grandfather received a lung transplant during football season, leaving Berry to spend several weekends with family in Jacksonville, Fla., where his grandfather was undergoing the transplant.

"Being on a plane to car rides, whatever it may have been, just kind of then settling back down for school and football was a little difficult," said Berry.

Berry said he only missed about one practice due to a delayed flight, but he was glad to have the support of his teammates while he was with his family.

"Just thanking God that (my grandfather's) still with us today and able to get the lung transplant that he needed and doing great now," said Berry.

Berry's leadership on the field is evident, but he also leads by example off the field through his character and values.

"Over the last three years we have put an emphasis on changing the culture of the program and Blaze has been a huge part of that. We stress not only on the field play but being good young men off the field, whether that be out in the community or in the classroom. Blaze is a young man of strong Christian belief. He has over a 4.0 in the classroom and is a young man of high moral character. He is a great representative for our football program, as well as the community of Eminence and Henry County," said Jones.

Family and faith are two of his main sources of motivation and influence, allowing him to remain humble and kind in all



Blaze Berry speaks with head coach Ryan Jones after a game during the 2023 season.

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Blaze Berry sends a pass down the field against Trimble County in 2023.

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interactions and circumstances.

"My family has always instilled in me, and role-modeled it for me, putting everyone before yourself. Then with my faith, I've kind of just learned that that's something that shows and stands out to other people. It kind of shows God through me and let his light shine in me and just allowed me to do amazing things on the field because I put other people first and because I want them to get the recognition and not me," said Berry.

Personally, Berry stays the course through his motto, "One Way," stemming partially from one of his all-time favorite Bible verses, John 14:6.

"Then, I actually watched Woodlawn, which is a football movie, and it gave me the inspiration to put "One Way" on my helmet and that's now my motto," said Berry. "It's his way and he allows me to do amazing things because I'm following his way."

Several teammates have adopted the phrase as well, adding it to their cleats or helmets on Friday nights.

"We kind of all have adopted it and embodied it because of our faith, and we believe that with God, we're able to do amazing things on the field and have a special group of talent and a special group of guys," said Berry.

Their shared faith has aided in the culture

change as well by uniting the players with a greater purpose in mind.

"Having prayer sessions as well as FCA meetings, all that has allowed us to become closer and showcase kind of what God has done in our lives, as well as what he can do in others' lives," Berry said.

On the sidelines, he lives out his motto and exemplifies his faith, constantly encouraging teammates and lifting them to reach their full potential.

He willingly puts eye-catching statistics, records and awards aside, simply because he wants the team to excel above all else.

"I go out there to win a game, not for the individual recognition or the stats or whatever that is, but to help our team succeed and go far and do amazing things on the field," said Berry. "I'd rather that all be gone away (individual recognition) and just focus on our record and how far we go in the playoffs and what we do in the season."

When all is said and done, Berry's name will be etched into Warrior football history in many ways, leaving a personal legacy as a humble and hard-working athlete, and a team legacy as the group that created a positive culture shift for the program.

"I just want them to remember me as a great teammate, great leader and a strong man of faith," said Berry.