



[Home](#) / [Sports](#) / [WKU Sports](#)

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TOP STORY

WKU football

'This is your shot:' Eckels ready to finally start for Hilltoppers

Florida native waited last 4 years behind Doughty, White before taking over

By BRAD STEPHENS bstephens@bgdailynews.com Jul 12, 2018

Western Kentucky quarterback Drew Eckels looks at a receiver April 21 during the spring game at Houchens-Smith Stadium. Eckels, a redshirt senior, is at the top of the Hilltoppers' depth chart at quarterback heading into the start of fall camp beginning Aug. 1.

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Drew Eckels waited four seasons for his chance to be Western Kentucky's starting quarterback.

Now the redshirt senior finally gets to be the guy.

"I'm a big, firm believer in fate," Eckels told the Daily News this week. "Fate has led me here to Western and I didn't play right away. I had to mature a little bit as a kid.

"Here I am, and I feel like fate's led me here to this point, basically saying, 'This is your shot. This is what you've got.' I'm going to work with it."

Eckels is at the top of the Hilltoppers' quarterback depth chart going into fall camp, which starts Aug. 1. He and his WKU teammates kick off their 2018 season Aug. 31 at Wisconsin.

After arriving on campus in 2014, Eckels spent the first four seasons of his career playing behind either Brandon Doughty or Mike White. He watched as those two quarterbacks rewrote school passing records, won conference championships and led the Toppers to bowl games.

Doughty and White are gone. Eckels is now the old guy of the quarterback room, the 6-foot-3, 220-pound veteran who's appeared in 17 games the last three seasons but will start this season at WKU for the first time.

"I think he's got the support of the team and he's got respect from his teammates because he didn't just try to jump ship and go somewhere else," said White, who was drafted in April by the NFL's Dallas Cowboys.

"He could've easily played at another school. He decided to stay at Western and I think he deserves this chance more than anything."

The last time Eckels was a starting quarterback, the Daytona, Fla., native led hometown school Warner Christian Academy to a 20-4 record over his junior and senior prep seasons.

Eckels threw for 2,027 yards and 27 touchdowns as a senior in 2013. He played under coach Steve Allen, a veteran Florida high school coach.

Allen, who now leads DeLand (Fla.) High School's program, still calls Eckels "the best quarterback I've ever coached."

"He has arm talent," Allen said. "He has athletic ability. He has some great anticipation skills.

"He's a guy that other guys want to play with. ... He's just a regular guy who loves to play ball and I'm proud of him. I'm real proud of him."

Eckels' high school play got the attention of Bryan Ellis and Tyson Helton, both of whom were assistant coaches at Alabama-Birmingham. He committed in 2013 to play for the Blazers.

UAB underwent a coaching change the following offseason, as coach Garrick McGee resigned, and Bill Clark took his place. Ellis and Helton ended up on Jeff Brohm's staff at WKU, and Eckels followed them to Bowling Green.

"I knew that somebody was going to get a gem and they were going to be real pleased with what they got in Drew," Allen said. "He's a good kid. He's not going to cause any problems. He's not going to get in trouble. He's going to be there. He's going to be a program guy."

"I just had to keep convincing Drew that no matter what happens through all this Western Kentucky deal, 'Just hang in there.' We talked before we went there that if the worst thing that ever happens is you get to play college football and you get a degree and it's paid for, then you've been blessed. And here we are."

Eckels redshirted in 2014. He debuted in 2015 for mop-up duty in a blowout win at North Texas but broke his collarbone on a four-yard rushing play and was done for the season.

The next year, Eckels appeared in eight games, completing 6-of-12 pass attempts for 118 yards. He threw his first college touchdown to wide receiver Lucky Jackson late in a 2016 loss at No. 1 Alabama.

The Hilltoppers won Conference USA championships and bowl games in both those campaigns, led by Doughty in 2015 and White in '16.

Eckels stayed patient during that time, learning from the two successful starting QBs.

"I took tons of different things from both of them," Eckels said of Doughty and White. "They kind of paved the way for how to control yourself, how to control your tempers. In every situation, there's a certain way to act."

“Both of them do tremendous jobs in holding themselves accountable for what’s right and what’s wrong. They helped me in a tremendous amount of ways, probably too many ways to name.”

Eckels got part-time duty last season as a change-of-pace QB in Mike Sanford’s first year as WKU coach. He played eight games off the bench as a redshirt junior, rushing 12 times for 27 yards and going 8-of-11 through the air for 86 yards.

White finished his college career with the 2017 campaign, opening the Tops’ starting quarterback job to a competition.

Eckels competed this spring alongside scholarship teammates Steven Duncan and Davis Shanley. Sanford declared in May that the veteran Eckels would be WKU’s starter heading into fall camp.

“He’s not just a good storyline, he’s not just a good teammate,” Sanford said last month. “He’s a good, athletic player. He’s a player that can do things as a passer inside the pocket and outside the pocket and beyond.

“And he’s also an infectious leader. ... He’s a guy that the young men on the team, they galvanize behind him. I’m excited to see what he’s capable of doing.”

Eckels brings a different dimension to the offense than Doughty or White, both of whom were traditional drop-back pocket passers.



The new starter Eckels is still a pass-first QB, but he differs in that he can use his feet to extend plays outside the pocket.

That's a trait that can be valuable this season. WKU has a young offensive line, but it also has veteran receivers like Jackson and Quin Jernighan who can break open downfield and present themselves as targets if Eckels must escape the pocket.

Eckels can also tuck the ball and run for a few yards if that becomes the best option.

Sanford has said he wants to play quarterbacks who can keep defenses accountable with their feet. Eckels fits that bill.

"Drew Eckels, when it comes to throwing the ball on the run, I've honest to God never seen someone throw the ball so effortlessly and accurately," White said. "It's to the point where I almost think he throws the ball better on the run than in the pocket.

"I think that's one thing where he'll be able to help the offense is the mobility of the position and running the football as well."

Eckels has taken on a leadership role within the quarterback room, the offense and the team as a whole. He's picked up experience this summer leading player-run practices where coaches aren't allowed to be present.

Eckels said he also feels more confident with Sanford's scheme entering the coach's second year.

The start of the season won't be easy. Wisconsin will almost certainly be a top-10 team when the season opens. WKU also has a trip Sept. 15 to Louisville and opens C-USA play Sept. 29 against rival and likely league contender Marshall.

"With Wisconsin, all I can say is, 'Challenge accepted,' " Eckels said. "That's really been my motto. Yeah, what they did last year was good. It's just a different time, different team and no matter who it is, they bleed just like you do."

Eckels and his teammates are trying to reach bowl eligibility for the eighth straight year, play in a fifth straight bowl game and compete for a Conference USA title after stumbling down the stretch last year to a 6-7 record.

The new starting quarterback has waited his whole college career for this chance. Now he wants to make the most of it.

“When my number’s called ... I’ll come in with the attitude of, ‘This could be your last play. This could be your last down,’ ” Eckels said. “So I really just try to take everything as my last play.

“I feel like going into the season now that I’ve had more playing time, I feel like that’ll give me much more confidence in myself to lead this team to another bowl game, another good season and keep on going.”{&end}

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VIDEO: WKU coach Mike Sanford on the Hilltoppers' QBs
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