

QB Danny Etling



Danny Etling's Journey to the NFL

By Crissy Froyd

Jun 21, 2018, 9:00am CDT

There are 38 seconds left on the clock.

The scoreboard reads 21-17 in Camping World Stadium. It's fourth-down and it's the last play LSU has to keep its hopes alive for the title of 2018 Citrus Bowl Champions. The snap is off from Will Clapp. Danny Etling looks to his right, and the ball is just off the fingertips of tight end Foster Moreau.

It's all over in a painfully winnable game that just barely slipped away.

Etling sits on the bench with his head down. The camera pulls away to show Notre Dame in victory formation. The clock ticks down from twenty seconds and then to zero as the Fighting Irish storm the field.

Etling looks up for a moment. He's in a daze. A chapter in his life has just slammed shut in an unceremonious way. Not at all the way he had planned it out. This is not how it was supposed to end.

The Danny Etling story begins in small town Indiana. A place called Terre Haute that you've probably never heard of unless you're a native to the state.

It's the day before a big game and the South Vigo Braves are in the midst of a bit of a dilemma on special teams.

"It was my junior year and it was my first year playing. I played kicker and was trying to beat out a senior for the position," Adam Kahn says. "So one day in walk-throughs, the day before the game, the coach had me and the other kicker try five field goals. The starter at the time missed the first few, but I came in and hit every one of them."

Head coach Mark Raetz breathes a sigh of relief. The underdog has unexpectedly bested his starter, but he's got a kicker he can feel good about putting in tomorrow's contest.

Curiously, there's one person standing at the edge of the field who looks even happier than Raetz. It's Etling.

"Just seeing Danny get so pumped on the sidelines and running around getting everyone fired up was awesome," Kahn said. "You know, he was the most popular guy on the team and everyone supported him."

Danny doesn't care about status though. One guy making an improvement, regardless of how small, is a win for the whole team.

"So for him to do the same for me meant a lot to me as both a close friend and a teammate."

There's a reason why Etling was so loved and admired in Terre Haute. He set a standard of excellence with a football first mentality. Absolutely nothing was able to come between the high school signal caller and the pigskin.

"From the start, the guy was dedicated," Kahn said. "If we were going to hang out, he was going to work out first. When we all went on spring break, he was doing drills at the beach. If it was the offseason, he'd do some Sunday throwing with guys on the team. Just always doing something to make sure each day he got a little better."

In 2017, Etling's final season as an LSU quarterback, fans and analysts alike saw an average athlete who would quietly fade into the background of sports history just as soon as he walked off the field.

But Bill Belichick and the New England Patriots saw something entirely different. Someone to throw in the mix to be the next heir apparent to arguably the best to ever play the game - Tom Brady.

The initial negativity used to bother Etling a little bit, but is something he's drowned out now.

"It's not something I'm really worried about anymore. Just because now I have the opportunity that I wanted. I really just focus on the present, the right now," he tells me.

"My family and my friends and obviously my coaches have been super supportive. Those are three groups of people whose opinion I really care about, and really trust. So as long as they have a high opinion of me, and my teammates as well, then I'm going to be at a good place in my life."

One of these "family members" is cousin Kit Hanley, who just so happens to share the LSU sports connection as a current member of the Tigers' swim team.

"Danny doesn't take no for an answer," she said. "He is one of the most determined and hardworking people I know. His love for football is unparalleled by most. He goes after what he wants, and he has immense grit doing it."

This strong love for the sport has been something that's driven Etling since his childhood years.

"It's a dream come true. Obviously, I've been dreaming of playing in the NFL since I was a little kid. Since when I started playing football. So, to get to come to a great organization like the New England Patriots, an organization that is so well respected, that has won so much is just an honor."

Yes, there's raw talent to work with there. Etling has NFL size at 6-foot-3, and has the arm strength necessary to compete in the pros. He won't turn the ball over either, as he threw just two interceptions his senior season.

But if there's anything to credit for him making it to this level and that will keep him a contender in New England, it's an unrivaled work ethic.

It's something that he's been known for since his days as a freshman at Purdue, where he competed for his first starting job alongside quarterbacks Rob Henry and Austin Appleby.

"Hard work is ingrained into the culture at Purdue," Henry said. "A lot of guys that go to Purdue to play aren't the most highly recruited players, so everyone feels they have something to prove. Danny was no exception. He came in and fit in great with that culture because his work ethic was so impeccable."

Appleby can concur.

"He always worked his tail off. Never had to worry about Danny doing what he needed to do during the week to get himself ready to play," he said. "He set a great example for his teammates as well. It was really cool getting to compete and push each other every day."

And it wasn't too long ago that Etling and Appleby went head-to-head again, but wearing different colors than Boilermaker black-and-gold this time.

"I always respected and appreciated Danny as a teammate and fellow quarterback. I'm really happy for his success and it was extra neat to be able to compete against him when Florida played LSU two years ago," Appleby said.

In that 2016 season, Appleby and the Gators snatched the win in a hard fought one in Tiger Stadium that ended in a score of 16-10.

It's clear Etling didn't let go of his tough mentality when he transferred to LSU to compete with Brandon Harris. If anything, he may have kicked it up a notch. Just ask former teammate and current New Orleans Saints center, Will Clapp.

"Every day after practice we would all leave for dinner. Even when everyone had left to go, Danny went back to the facility to watch more film after a long day," he said. It was something he did every single day that eventually made people want to go with him and get some extra film in too."

Sure, Clapp and Etling are a solid 1,500 miles away from each other now. But the distance doesn't keep them from serving as motivators to one another.

"Danny and I stay in touch. Of course we're both busy now, but every couple of weeks we get on the phone and probably talk for an hour, just catching up. We both just talk about starting from the bottom and trying to earn spots with a new team."

Etling still keeps a line of communication with his former Purdue teammates as well. As a matter of fact, you've probably heard of their group chat before. And there's a lot more to their conversations than just throwing a football.

"I text Danny occasionally to encourage him and let him know I am here to support him as a friend not only in football, but in life," Henry said. "Our conversations are usually brief on the subject of football, and more about life, health and family."

As significant as it may seem looking from the outside, Etling hasn't made his newfound future with the Patriots a major topic of conversation.

"As far as him mentioning competing for a spot goes, he hasn't said anything about it to me. But I do know this — he's going to put his head down and work his tail off to become the best player he can possibly be and will do whatever is asked of him in New England to the very best of his ability. He'll be ready for his shot," Appleby said.

And prepared for his shot he'll be. During the absence of Tom Brady from early Pats camp practices, Etling made the most of the extra reps he was given.

"I've learned a lot. I'm getting better in minicamp now, so you have to make sure whatever reps you get you can take advantage of," he said. "That's just kind of what I'm doing now as I keep going and keep moving forward as I continue to try and develop and become the player I want to be - the player that I think the Patriots want me to become."

Securing the starting job down the line will not be any easy task. The seventh-rounder knows he's more than just an underdog - he's fighting to place his name on an NFL roster.

"I'm just trying to learn the system. Trying to find a place for myself here and trying to find a role and a job and all of those things."

But it all boils down to one single concept. There's a key to it all in the eyes of Etling.

"It's really just consistency. That's the main thing I really want improve on," he said. "Whether that's footwork, or knowing and understanding the offense, whatever else it may entail. It's something that I'm working hard toward and going to continue to keep working on."

And he won't be loud about it either. Danny Etling is not your Josh Rosen, who names those chosen ahead of him as "mistakes."

He knows his place.

"I've got a long ways to go," he simply puts it.

Not surprisingly, Etling was the last player on the field on multiple occasions. It's paying off, and reporters all around Boston are taking notice.

"...the seventh round pick out of LSU wasn't half bad for his first showing," The Boston Herald's Kate Guregian wrote. "He was more on target than Hoyer. Without pressure, he was at ease throwing the football. Assistant quarterbacks coach Jerry Schuplinski worked quite a bit with Etling, who was the last to leave the field."

ESPN's Mike Reiss had something of the same tune to say about number 58.

"I also took note of how he has been one of the first players on the field, and one of the last to leave," he noted. "While that alone won't earn a roster spot, it could also be viewed as a reflection of his commitment to his craft."

According to his friends, the Mass Communications major is a man of many talents. When Etling is not grinding it out on the gridiron, you can catch him working on his rap game.

"A fun fact about Danny is that he may very well be the best rapper alive, low key," Appleby laughed. "If you catch him at the right time and he spits a couple of bars, it's actually incredible. Freestyle rap is definitely up there with the hidden talents."

Or shooting some hoops.

"Danny is actually a pretty good basketball player. I feel he probably could have been a point guard, he plays basketball just like he plays quarterback. In the aspect that he's always passing and setting everybody up for plays," Clapp explained.

Wherever Etling is - no matter what he's doing - he has a natural ability to draw people to him.

"Danny is a genuine, high character guy. He's the type of guy any man would want his daughter to date," Henry said. "He's a great leader that people gravitate towards both on and off the field. He's a humorous individual who does not take himself too seriously and can make light of any situation."

Regardless of how hard Etling works, or how great of a person and friend he may be, it's hard to ignore the fates of his predecessors. The careers of other LSU quarterbacks who have gone on to the next level have often ended in failure.

But Etling remains optimistic to become the first in decades to break the mold, and knows it will be no overnight process.

"I'm not really too sure about all of that yet, considering I haven't played a game. I've just been practicing and trying to join in on this system as best as I can. That's probably a down the road question. I'm just as inexperienced in the NFL as anyone."

He's taking it all one day at a time and seeing the situation right in front of him for exactly what it is.

"For me it's been more of an adjustment to the NFL and trying to become a pro. I use this opportunity to grow as both a player and a person."

Deep down inside though, Etling wants to be the next great. And there's something so contagious about that grit and determination that makes everyone believe that it just has to be him, despite how highly the odds are stacked.

"I'd say Danny likes the limelight a bit more than some people might think," Kahn said.

But it's not to be confused with arrogance or a need for attention.

"Now, that's not to be taken in a negative way," he explains. "But just in the sense that he's always been known as this low-key, under the radar guy. Especially with his approach to media."

"But I know he lives for those big moments. He may not show it, but I know he's working his tail off to get that moment to shine."
