

Playbook

Press  Enterprise

2020 Week 3

Van the Man

Work ethic, not autism, defines Danville's Van Merchant

Take The



ROTO-ROOTER
SEWER-DRAIN SERVICE



FOOTBALL CHALLENGE

ENTER TODAY BY 4PM

ENTER TO WIN

This Week's
Prize Pack Winner:
Isabella H.

Grand Prize sponsored
by: **ROTO-ROOTER**
SEWER-DRAIN SERVICE
and **Atlantic Shore Vacations**

How to ENTER: Go to the link:
pressenterpriseonline.com/contests/football

Equal opportunity: Merchant

From his hatred of 'Baby Shark' to dominant performances at V

By **ARTHUR DOWELL**

Press Enterprise Copy Editor

DANVILLE — One look along Danville's sideline and it's safe to assume that Van Merchant is like every other player donning a purple and orange jersey.

Except he's not. The senior defensive lineman, sporting No. 72 for the Ironmen, has autism.

However, Merchant does not let it define him, and neither do his teammates or coaches. Instead, he is treated like everyone else — on and off the field.

"He's no different than the rest of us," said Tyler Simas, Merchant's teammate and best friend since middle school. "I've always treated him as an equal and I think I've kind of led the whole team to treat him as equal."

Merchant's father, Rhett, has seen multiple players extend a hand, offering all the support needed to make him a valuable member of the team.

"When he got a tackle in a scrimmage, it wasn't his reaction which was great, it was the reaction of his teammates," he said. "Without how they handled themselves through the years, it would have been so different for him."

First-year coach Mike Brennan and his staff quickly bought into that equal treatment and find Merchant a joy to be around.

"He brings genuine passion (to the team)," Brennan said. "Everything he does, whether it's in the weight room, a conditioning drill or on the field drill, when you're talking to the team, his eyes are completely on you."

"He does everything exactly the way you're supposed to do it. He gives tremendous effort and he leaves nothing on the field. He loves the game of football and loves being part of the team."

Season in jeopardy

Despite there being a lot of questions surrounding the pandemic and this season in general, the biggest being asked by the Merchants was how Van would adjust to Brennan as coach after three years of playing for Jim Keiser.

"Autism can be tough. Every year is a change. We were nervous when he went to high school," Rhett Merchant said. "The change from Keiser to Brennan was a worry, but the transition has been great. They include him and listen to him."

"Patterns are important to Van. He understands that as a senior, he's not supposed to play JV, but he wanted to play JV because he wants to show them what they taught him."

Though he doesn't tally a lot of varsity playing time, Merchant still finds ways to



Press Enterprise/Jimmy May

DANVILLE'S VAN MERCHANT (72) stands with his teammates as coach **Mike Brennan** talks with them on the sidelines during last Friday night's game against Mid-West in Danville.

make his presence known. He hypes his teammates up before games, celebrates big plays — he was often seen pumping up the home crowds in the pre-coronavirus days — and even gets kindly picked on by the public address announcer.

During Danville's home opener last weekend, the popular children's song "Baby Shark" played over the stadium's speakers. Merchant isn't a fan of the song, but his favorite people, the school's cheerleaders, had a dance to go along with the song.

"They played that song because it drives Van nuts," Rhett Merchant said.

The grudge, if any, didn't last long as Van Merchant went and did his favorite game day tradition when the final whistle blew — taking pictures with the cheerleaders.

"I like coming out of the tunnel (before games), but I really like taking pictures with the cheerleaders ... and Tyler," Merchant said.

Wing King

Being involved with the team doesn't just happen between the hash marks. Merchant enjoys hanging out with his teammates in many different settings. He's the undisputed wing night champion and typically enjoys 24 barbeque or mild wings in one sitting.

He recently also proved that he can take the tackling skills he learned on the gridiron and apply them to tackling ... a steer. He did

so at the Benton Rodeo — and rather quickly.

"You have to grab it by the horns. (Simas) taught me that," Merchant said of comparing steer tackling to playing defense. "You have to grab him by the horns and put your hip into it."

Not too shabby for a kid that picked up football in the eighth grade after being involved in the Special Olympics in State College. It was there where he met former Penn State great Saquon Barkley and a few of his teammates, and made it his mission to play for the Big Ten program.

"He had a wonderful time there," Rhett Merchant said. "As we came back, he turned and said 'I want to play football,' turning to me and saying 'I'm going to play for Penn State.'"

After asking where he had to play first, Van Merchant then "ran out of the car, up a hill to start training. It hasn't stopped since."

Neither Van or Rhett have had regrets since that exchange.

"The little things that happen — the first time he ran out of the tunnel, his first tackle, the first time he got into a varsity game, it all adds up," Rhett Merchant said. "It all adds up to that I'm very proud of him."

Arthur Dowell can be reached at 570-387-1234 ext. 1314 or by email at arthur.dowell@pressenterprise.net. Follow him on Twitter @ [ABCDowell](https://twitter.com/ABCDowell)



DANVILLE'S VAN MERCHANT, foreground

ant fits right in at Danville

Wing Night, Ironmen senior is 'no different than the rest of us'



Press Enterprise/Jimmy May

and right, stands on the sideline with his teammates while watching last Friday night's game against Midd-West at Danville.