

Kemp off to good start in unexpected role as Pirates' top QB

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(Photo: The Associated Press)

GREENVILLE, N.C. (AP) — Blake Kemp hasn't exactly had a straight path to become East Carolina's starting quarterback.

He lost a preseason battle for the job, only to have an injury hurry him into the lineup for the opener. Now he's preparing for his fourth start, leading the Pirates against visiting Virginia Tech on Saturday.

"Just throw and catch, man," the junior college transfer said. "It's simple. You really try to keep it as simple as possible."

This wasn't the way things were supposed to work for the Pirates (1-2), who came into this year with an offense in flux after losing all-time passing leader Shane Carden and offensive coordinator Lincoln Riley to Oklahoma. The expectation was for sophomore Kurt Benkert — who had seen spot duty behind Carden — to win a three-man race for the starting job in preseason.

Benkert won the starting job roughly two weeks before the opener by beating out Kemp and Cody Keith. But a week later, Benkert suffered a serious knee injury in practice that would keep him out for the season.

That thrust Kemp into the starting role. Keith has since left the program after an injury-plagued career, moving another junior college transfer — James Summers — into the No. 2 role on a reshuffled depth chart.

"You're getting the guy adjusted to a different amount of reps," coach Ruffin McNeill said. "Usually you give the starters 80-20, so that's an adjustment. For us it was right before the season so we had to make a quick adjustment. . You have to be ready for it."

Kemp has thrown for at least 300 yards in each of the past two losses at Florida and Navy, and his three-game totals of 893 yards passing and nearly 71-percent completion rate surpass Carden's totals from his first three starts in 2012.

East Carolina has stayed largely with the pass-heavy spread under new offensive coordinator Dave Nichol, who is in his fourth year on the staff. And Kemp ran a similar offense at his previous stop at Mesa Community College in Arizona.

"He's pretty even-keeled," Nichol said. "When I get pretty upset, he's good about brushing it off, listening and then going to the next play.

"Just his personality and persona is probably his best attribute. And that's helped him be good. He doesn't really care about how many (fans) there are or how loud it is. And obviously that's a good thing with our offense."

Virginia Tech coach Frank Beamer specifically mentioned Kemp's accuracy when asked about the quarterback.

"Very accurate, gets rid of the ball, doesn't hang onto it too long," Beamer said "I'd say (he's) a smart kid. It looks like he knows where he wants to go with the ball depending on what he's seeing."

Kemp has been especially good in the past two games considering he's gotten little help from ECU's rushing attack. Despite the Pirates managing minus-13 yards on the ground in the 31-24 loss at Florida, Kemp nearly directed a late drive for a tying touchdown before fumbling in the final seconds.

Last week, the Pirates managed 80 yards rushing in the loss to Navy.

Still, Kemp threw six touchdowns against two interceptions on 103 throws in two games.

"Football's a crazy game," Kemp said. "One day you're not expecting to play and the next day you are. Really not a whole lot has changed. . You still prepare the same way as if you're 1 or 3 on the depth chart."