



Experts predict that Scarlet Knight running backs Brian Leonard (left) and Ray Rice—roommates on the road—will one day meet up in the NFL.

## Thunder & Lightning Redux

Running backs Brian Leonard and Ray Rice are all about speed and power

*By Bill Glovin*

**Y**oung kids seeking autographs and students looking to bond with their heroes surround Brian Leonard and Ray Rice on the Rutgers Stadium field. It's November 2005, and the Scarlet Knights have just won their biggest game in at least two decades: a convincing 44-9 thrashing of the Cincinnati Bearcats in front of a crowd of nearly 35,000. Leonard's 79 rushing yards, six pass catches, and two touchdowns, and Rice's 195 rushing yards and two touchdowns, were crucial to the win, which locked up the team's first bowl bid in 27 years.

Leonard and Rice. Rice and Leonard. The two-roommates on the road who have become as close as brothers—are the biggest thing to hit Scarlet Knights football since another Knights tandem, Terrell Willis and Bruce Presley, gained 2,002 yards, earning them the moniker “Thunder and Lightning” in 1993. ESPN.com calls the pair “one of the better one-two punches” in college football, while *Sporting News* has picked them as “the number one backfield in the country.”

Both were highly publicized New York state high school players who had Syracuse high on their lists of

college choices. Leonard, who grew up 45 minutes from the Syracuse campus in Gouverneur, New York, decided to follow in the footsteps of his older brother, Nate, who played linebacker for Rutgers. Rice originally committed to the Orange before changing his mind when coach Paul Pasqualoni was fired. "We definitely like what we have," Rutgers coach Greg Schiano told ESPN.com. "I don't know about anybody else's backfield; I just know I like both of them."

There is much to like—and for Scarlet Knights fans to love—about both players. Leonard, 22, is a 6'2",

learned is that Brian is an even better person than he is a football player."

Leonard credits Rice as a major reason Rutgers went to the Insight Bowl last December. "Before Ray came, I was pretty much the featured back and there were times when, after carrying the ball 30 times a game, I'd feel really beat up and bruised," says Leonard, a labor studies and employment relations major. "Last season we split the carries, which kept me fresher through the season. We also seemed to feed off each other's successes. I realize it was rare to see a freshman and a senior

*Sporting News* has picked **Leonard** and **Rice** as "the **number one** backfield in the country."

235-pound fullback who punishes defenses with his bruising running style and ability to catch screen passes. His commitment to pass protection and opening holes for teammates through his blocking has made him a top NFL prospect. A *Pro Football Weekly* All-American in both 2004 and 2005, Leonard needs just 20 points to become Rutgers all-time leading scorer.

The speedy 19-year-old Rice, at 5'9" and 195 pounds, is coming off the best freshman season of any running back in Rutgers history. A tailback that bursts through the hole and is able to consume real estate in chunks, he piled up 1,120 yards on 195 carries, fifth among the country's true freshmen. Rice's total exceeded the 918 yards the entire Rutgers team rushed for in 2004.

The admiration each has for the other is readily apparent as they talk about their relationship and their goals for the upcoming season. "I knew coming in here that Brian was the man to look up to," says Rice, a standout in both football and basketball at New Rochelle High School in New York. "I saw Brian dominate Michigan State on TV in 2004 and thought, 'Wow, it is going to be an honor to meet him.' What I've

hanging out, but Ray came in here as a very mature guy who knows when it's time to have fun—and when it's time to work."

Leonard had first seen his friend play during the Governor's Bowl, a Rutgers Stadium all-star contest that pits the best high school players from New Jersey against their New York counterparts. "I knew he would be outstanding, but I wasn't expecting so much so soon," says Leonard. "By Pittsburgh, I knew Ray was really something special," says Leonard. In the season's fourth contest, a 37-29 home victory, Rice was a difference-maker, running for 114 yards on 15 carries.

While Leonard debated during the off-season whether or not to enter the NFL draft, Rice's prayers were answered when his roommate decided to return for 2006. "Brian could be in the NFL right now, but he chose to come back; we need to show him that he made the right choice," says Rice. Responds Leonard, "I came here to help turn this program around and make history. We made some history last year, but we didn't win [a bowl game]. I want a ring that says Big East championship and to go to a BCS [Bowl Championship Series] game."

## Our Favorite Things

### THE ROOMMATES COME CLEAN

#### Pro NFL Player

Brian: Mike Alstott (Tampa Bay)

Ray: Emmitt Smith (Dallas)

#### NFL Team

Brian: New York Giants

Ray: San Francisco 49ers

#### Flick

Brian: *Varsity Blues*

Ray: *Bad Boys II*

#### Actress

Brian: Jennifer Aniston

Ray: Halle Berry

#### Favorite Band

Brian: Linkin Park

Ray: His cousin's group, Ress Connection

#### Role Model

Brian: My older brother, Nate

Ray: Brian

To inspire them before each away game, the roommates call Rice's Uncle Andy and put him on speakerphone. The ultimate booster, Andy Rice, a custodian at his nephew's former high school, entertains them with colorful tales from his own playing days. Says Andy, "It's remarkable how much those two are alike. I think they like that I made up an end zone dance for each." While he hasn't named Ray's dance, he calls Leonard's "The Hurdler" for the way he hurdles over would-be tacklers.

This season Andy plans to drive to Piscataway to attend all home games—just as he did last season. "At the end of the game, I'll be the 300-pound guy doing my own dance in the middle of the field. And based on what I expect to see from Brian and Ray, I think I'll be doing plenty of dancin'." □

*Bill Glovin is senior editor of RUTGERS MAGAZINE.*