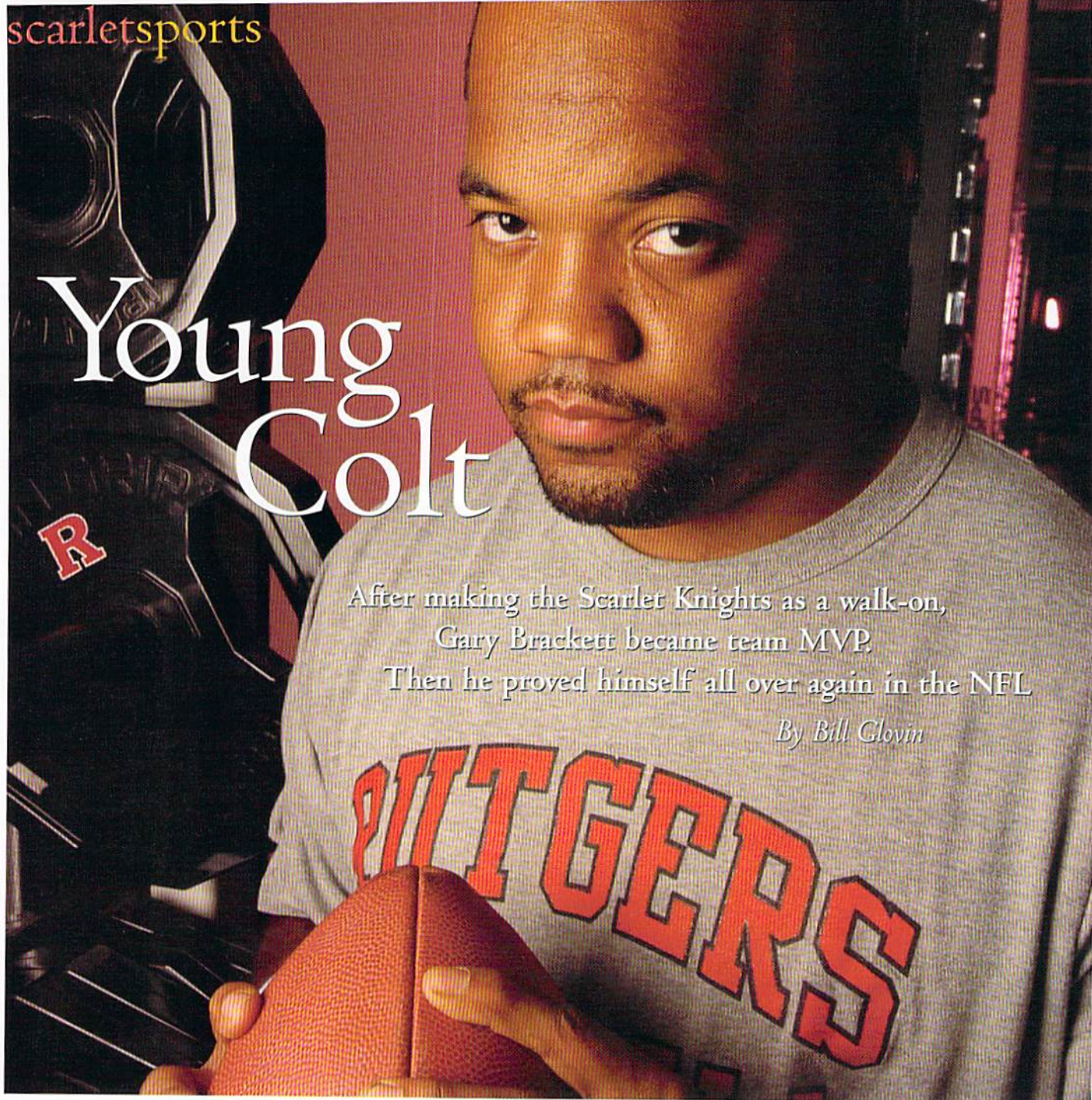


Young Colt

After making the Scarlet Knights as a walk-on, Gary Brackett became team MVP. Then he proved himself all over again in the NFL

By Bill Glovin



Gary Brackett surveys the newly renovated and expanded weight and training room at the Hale Center in Piscataway as if it's a new theme park at Disney World. Just one year before Brackett became a significant contributor on the 12-4 Indianapolis Colts—an NFL team that fell one game short of the Super Bowl in 2004—this room was his sanctuary. After catching up with Brackett, Jay Butler, the strength and conditioning coordinator for the Scarlet Knights football team, says, “Gary was always the first guy in and the last to leave. I wish everyone was like him.”

At least a half-dozen of Brackett's former teammates—training to heavy metal music—spot their former captain and middle linebacker and, one by one, drift over to warmly welcome him back. Known to his teammates and coaches as “Brack,” Brackett, 24, congratulates them on their new digs. The man who won the Homer Hazel Award as a junior and senior as the team MVP achieved legendary status for his work ethic, his on-the-field achievements, and his leadership. “The Gary Bracketts, that’s why I got into coaching,” Rutgers defensive coordinator Paul Ferrero told the *Record* of Hackensack after the 2002 season. “These types of players, these types of people, they’re not a dime a dozen. He means everything to our program.”

This is only the second time Brackett is seeing his former teammates since he graduated with a business economics degree in May 2003. He is in New Brunswick to donate white blood cells to his 27-year-old brother, Greg, who is suffering from leukemia and is about to undergo a stem cell transplant at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital. While Brackett's rise to become a professional football player has a Rocky-like quality to it, he's had a devastating year of loss and heartache. His mother, Sandra, a nurse and minister, and his father, Granville, a disabled Vietnam War vet, both recently passed away. Now it's Greg who is fighting for his life.

It was his parents who instilled in him the idea that he could accomplish anything in the world if he set his mind to it. Brackett, unable to make his peewee football team because he was overweight, was pushed by his three older brothers to the point where he not only made the Glassboro High School football team, but also became a linebacker and running back and an All-South Jersey Defensive Player of the Year. In high school, Brackett's lack of core curriculum classes and relatively small size kept the Division I recruiters away.

Rod Sharpless, the defensive line coach under former Rutgers head football coach Terry Shea and a friend of Brackett's high school coach, helped Brackett gain admission to Rutgers through the Equal Opportunity Fund (EOF) program. Brackett's parents and assistant dean Frager Foster agreed that in the fall semester of Gary's first year, he should stay off the gridiron and concentrate on his academics.

With a 3.3 cumulative average that fall, Brackett more than qualified academically to participate in spring football as a freshman and was ready to try to make the team as a walk-on. But shortly before practice was to begin, he hit a rock while riding his bike and fell on glass. He needed 40 stitches and four months of physical therapy to repair his hand. He finally made the team, but saw limited action and considered dropping out. "EOF only provided a little bit of money; my parents refinanced their house twice to get through that first year," he says. "I knew that unless I received a football scholarship, I wouldn't be able to reenroll for my sophomore year."

Although he was not projected to start in 2000, Brackett got the football scholarship because of his potential to contribute on special teams. He rewarded the coaches' faith in him that year by winning the Twelfth Man Award, given to the Knights' best special teams player.

When Greg Schiano replaced Shea as head football coach in 2001, Brackett viewed it as his make-or-break opportunity. "Coach Schiano told us, 'To be successful, you can't just play



football, you have to live football.' Starting jobs were to be based on hard work, not on what had gone on before," recalls Brackett. "My philosophy changed to the point where I was even doing push-ups and sit-ups before I went to bed."

With the weight and training room as his second home, Brackett shed 15 pounds, reduced his body fat by 12 percent, and, at a lean 225 pounds, gained agility and confidence. Normally soft-spoken, he suddenly became more vocal in an attempt to strengthen the team's resolve. He exhorted his teammates to run their sprints faster and praised their ability as he called out the defensive signals in game situations. "It was disappointing to mostly lose, but by my senior year, we were in the games in the fourth quarter against Miami and Virginia Tech," he says. "I'd call that considerable progress."

All 32 NFL teams passed on Brackett in the 2003 draft, despite his finishing second in

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the Big East Conference with 116 tackles. "I'm undersized by NFL standards, but I knew I could hold my own with many guys in the conference who were drafted," says Brackett, only 5'11" but built like a sturdy fireplug. But when the Colts invited him to camp his spirits soared. "I was very confident that I could play on that level; it also helped that the Colts use the same three linebacker formations as Rutgers," he says. "For the linebacker position in the NFL, speed and good instincts are more important than size. Plus, you can't measure heart," he says, hitting his chest.

Following training camp, Brackett signed a two-year deal with the Colts for the league minimum. The Colts got more than their money's worth. Brackett started on special teams, moved into the role of fourth linebacker on passing situations, and played in every game. He had his first sack against the Buffalo Bills and, toward the end of the season, intercepted a pass thrown by Denver Bronco quarterback Jake Plummer and ran it back 31 yards for a touchdown. "Winning, not starting, is my primary focus," says Brackett. "Coach Schiano taught me what it means to put the team ahead of you. If we play as well this year as we did last year, there's a good chance Coach will be watching me in the Super Bowl." He's also going to do all he can to make sure that his brother, Greg, is watching, too.

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