

By Bill Glovin

In Rutgers sports, grit and determination help walk-on athletes make the team—and make a difference.

**O**n the gridiron, where size and strength usually rule, Bill Bailey's heart and desire became a Rutgers legend. During the late 1980s, as a 5' 8", 160-pound running back at West Milford High School, Bailey (CC'94) broke school records for rushing yards and touchdowns, won All-State honors, and twice led his team to the Group IV state football playoffs. His high school coach calls him "pound for pound, the best football player I saw in 27 years in coaching." Despite these accomplishments, the Division I college recruiters never came for Bailey. "I think my size scared them away," he muses. With no scholarship in hand, Bailey came to Rutgers with only one option: "Rutgers said I could try out for the team, and that was good enough for me," Bailey says. "I was

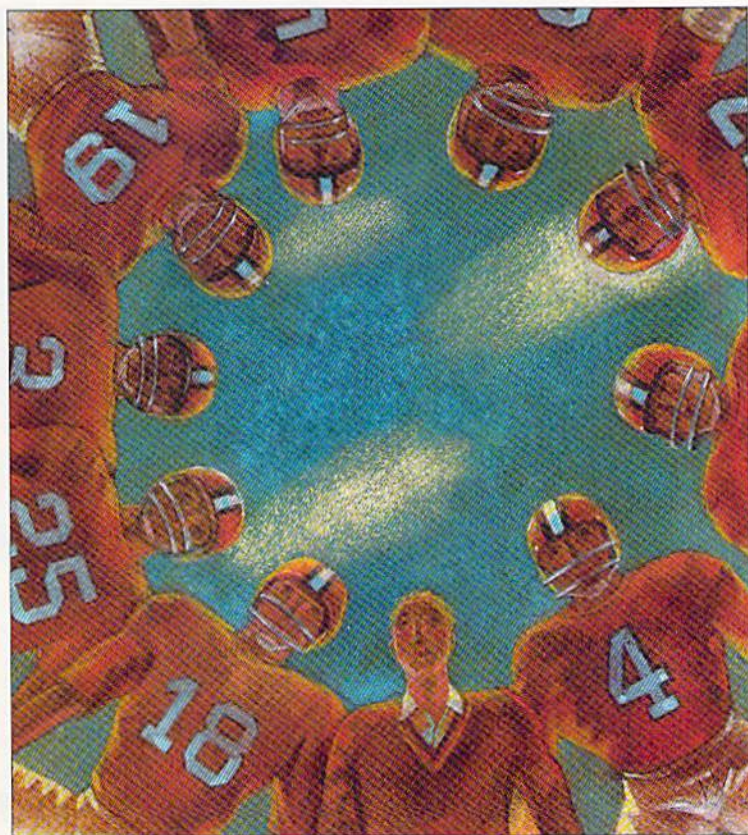
determined to prove that I could play on that level."

In his first year, Bailey impressed the coaching staff enough to join the roster as a practice player on the scout team. Dick Anderson, who was in his final season as the Scarlet Knights' head coach, told Bailey that as a walk-on—an athlete with no scholarship who makes the team in tryouts—he had little chance of ever playing a significant role. "I'm not sure whether he said that to motivate me or if he really meant it," says Bailey. Whatever Anderson's motive, it wasn't his opinion that mattered once new head coach Doug Graber took over.

"I had never heard of Bailey before, and the first time he touched the ball he ran about 50 yards through the whole defense," says Graber. It wasn't so much Bailey's speed as his leg strength and determination that impressed the coach. "I remember asking, 'Who the hell is this ball of fire?' The next year he was a starter, and in his senior year, our captain." Over his Rutgers career, the athlete who had been labelled "undersized" showed his grit by adding 30 pounds of muscle to his frame. When Graber announced that he was giving Bailey the scholarship that had eluded him as a high schooler, his teammates gave him a standing ovation.

Today, Bailey, who works with troubled youth at Project Core in Newark, is held up as a sterling example of how a walk-on can not only make the team but also make a difference as a leader and performer. When the Scarlet Knights football team trotted on to the field this year, few fans realized that nine of the top 24 players began their Rutgers careers as Bailey did. "The importance of walk-ons has increased in Division I football since NCAA rules changed," says Graber. Teams are now allowed to hand out only 85 scholarships over a four-year period, down from 95. "Since I've been here, we've had 14 players who have walked on and earned full scholarships. Many of these kids were players we knew nothing about."

**Coach Graber had never heard of Bill Bailey, but the first time the walk-on athlete touched the ball in tryouts he ran 50 yards through the whole defense. Not only did Bailey make the team, he eventually became its captain.**



Walk-ons fill a vital role in Division I football, where injuries can cut into the starting lineups, a single game sometimes calls for 70 players, and practice sessions require a hefty number of quality athletes. "I don't even like the term walk-on," says Graber. "We treat everybody the same from the start. If you're a walk-on, your best chance to impress a coach is through your work on the scout teams. Practice is an absolute key to how we do in a game, and every player has a significant role to play."

Walk-ons do trade in the practice field for the game field: On this year's Scarlet Knights, placekicker Nick Mike-Mayer, fullback Ezra Johnson, tight end Daniel LaTore, and center Pat Gorman are just some of the players who began their Rutgers careers as walk-ons before breaking into the starting lineup.

Other Rutgers sports find walk-ons instrumental as well. In recent years on New Brunswick teams, Creighton Drury (RC '92), Jac Leonardi (RC '94), and Chris Lee (RC'95) earned roster spots in men's basketball; Michael Haberman (Eng'89) and David Hoehler (Eng'92) proved their mettle in baseball, and Bobby Cook (RC'89) walked on to become captain for men's soccer. One of the most successful Rutgers walk-ons was Chris Daily (DC'82), co-captain of the Lady Knights national championship squad in 1982. Today, she is associate head coach for the University of Connecticut Huskies—the defending national champions in women's basketball.

Walk-ons in basketball and soccer have an especially difficult row to hoe. Bob Reasso, coach of the Scarlet Knights soccer team, says that in any given year, only between 15 to 25 New Jersey high schoolers have the skill to play for Rutgers, generally a nationally ranked team. If a player can't sprint 40 yards in five seconds or take the field regularly as a freshman or sophomore, he has little

chance of making it, says Reasso. Although nothing stops Reasso from recruiting more players than he needs and letting them compete for playing time in tryouts, "that wouldn't be fair," he says. On a nationally ranked team, there is no leisure to nurture a player with promising but unpolished skills. "Every so often I might find a player or two [through tryouts]," says Reasso, "but we encourage players who we think could develop over time to go elsewhere."

The story is similar on the Rutgers men's and women's basketball court. The men's team awards 13 scholarships and the women's 15, but only 10 players are required to practice, so there is little

need for extra players, that is, walk-ons. The odds against making it were punctuated this past October when not a single walk-on of the 35 who attended a one-day tryout for the men's basketball team made the grade. "Those who try out are generally those who were good high school players," says head coach Bob Wenzel (RC'71). "The few who have stuck were guards who knew going in that they probably wouldn't get much playing time in games, or team managers who filled in because of injuries."

An exception was Drury, a two-time All-County guard from Riverdell High School in Oradell. Former Rutgers' coach Craig Littlepage and a few Ivy League recruiters showed mild interest in Drury, but he decided to attend the Air Force Academy. "I went through basic training and realized that the military wasn't for me," Drury recalls. He transferred to Rutgers and tried out as a walk-on. "The first two days were grueling. We ran like crazy, drilled, and scrimmaged. Some tried to do too much to impress the coaches. I tried to do the little things, stayed within myself, and hoped they noticed. When I made the team, they let me know that I would only dress for home games. The rest would depend on how things developed."

**B**ecause  
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same chance," says baseball  
walk-on Mike Haberman.

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Wenzel, who was in his first year as Rutgers' coach, had gained enough confidence in Drury by midseason to pair him for more than 10 minutes against Marc Macon, Temple University's star guard. Based on that effort, Drury played from eight to 15 minutes a game the rest of the way. "Around the team, the walk-on label began to disappear," says Drury. "But I remained a walk-on to the fans and was always a favorite. They identified with me as some-

one who had once been in their shoes."

Going into his second season, Drury hurt his back, redshirted, and missed the entire year. Still, Wenzel thought enough of the 6' 3" guard, who never fully recovered from his injury, to provide him with a scholarship as a junior. Drury performed well that year but floundered until about midway through the next season. "I started the last six games and had the best game of my career against James Madison in the NIT," he recalls. "I

thought I had finally proved to everyone—my coaches and teammates, the media, the fans—that I could start on a Division I basketball team."

With a year of eligibility remaining in which to achieve that goal, Drury, who had interned with Senator Bill Bradley and had worked on various state legislative campaigns, was faced with a painful decision when he was invited to become assistant state director for the Clinton-Gore campaign. "My success in that last game was a big part of the reason I didn't come back," says Drury, who accepted the new challenge and went on to work after graduation as director of Bradley's South Jersey office. (He is now in law school at the University of Virginia.) "But not returning was a difficult decision, one that I can't help but think about from time to time."

Walk-ons probably have the best chance of making it in baseball since Rutgers only provides eight scholarships over a four-year period (The NCAA allows 11.9.). Each year three days of walk-on tryouts are held before the fall season begins. "This year 23 players attended tryouts, and nine players continued to work out with us through the fall," says head coach Fred Hill. "Of the nine, maybe one or two might stick in the spring."

Two players who stuck in recent years were David Hoehler, a pitcher from South Plainfield High School, and Mike Haberman, an All-County catcher from East Brunswick High School. By his senior year, Hoehler had developed into a starting pitcher and helped the Scarlet Knights win the Atlantic-10 Division and reach the NCAA tournament in 1992. Haberman, who as a junior third baseman hit .330 and was fifth in the nation in doubles, ended up as the starting catcher as a senior and hit .310.

Succeeding against the odds as a walk-on provided Haberman with an extra sense of satisfaction, he says. In his career as network director of engineering for Bell Atlantic/NYNEX Mobile, he applies some of the lessons he learned. "Because Coach Hill gave me the chance to develop, I think I'm more willing to look below the surface and give someone else that same chance," he says. "I also learned that with enough thought and planning, hard work, and belief in yourself, nothing is impossible." □

*Bill Glovin is the senior editor of Rutgers Magazine.*

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Evgenii Rukhin, Untitled (detail), 1975

