



Bleeding Scarlet

Meet Rutgers' greatest fans—people who are gaga over their favorite teams

By Bill Glovin

Sherif Salib looked down in disbelief. He had beaten his Middle Eastern pabla drum so hard that he pierced the drum skin and cut his already numb hand. “We were beating Penn State at home, and I guess you could say I got carried away,” says Salib, a 23-year-old graduate of Seton Hall University and a close friend of Scarlet Raiders men’s volleyball team setter Aleks Ondelj (NCAS’05).

Salib, who now laughs about the incident, says he will continue to bring his pabla drum to matches to support the Raiders this season despite the fact that Ondelj is no longer eligible to compete. Salib is a member of a large, unofficial, and rather anonymous group: Rutgers fans who demonstrate heroic devotion in support of their teams. And while one does not need to literally bleed scarlet to support a Rutgers team,

one achieves super-fan status by following the team on the road, no matter how far; wearing Rutgers’ garb into enemy territory, such as Princeton, Seton Hall, or UConn; or ponying up scholarship money.

The passion of Rutgers super fans knows no bounds and comes with its own rewards. Allen “Doc” Simonson (RC’50) is such a positive rooting force at Scarlet Knight baseball games, both at home and on the road, that Coach Fred Hill invites him to watch from the dugout. Before graduating in May, Steve Slaby (RC’04) and Lloyd Nolan (RC’04) were part of a group of about a half-dozen Scarlet Knight track team teammates known as the Redwigs. The student-athletes routinely donned red wigs and painted an “R” on their bare chests to show support at football and basketball games and crew races. And then there’s Paul “Pete” Jennings (RC’45), who has missed only two Rutgers football games since 1980. Jennings makes sure his attendance

record remains intact every year by building in a "flat tire day" for his trip back to Piscataway from his summer home in Maine for the season opener.

Why do they do it? For many, being a dedicated fan taps into a deep nostalgia for season after season spent at home games as children or students. Others become lifelong fans after witnessing Rutgers sports history in a monumental upset or unforgettable season, such as 1961, the year the Scarlet Knights football team went undefeated. Some thrill at watching athletes in Olympic sports compete at their best. Then again, there's always the sheer joy of going bonkers over a successful play, lost in a sea of equally crazed people.

Jennings' contingent of football tailgaters at home games includes his wife, Elcye, two sons, grandchildren, and friends. Around the grill at the season's opener against Michigan State in 2004, he echoed the sentiments of all super fans when he said: "My friends accuse me of being a Rutgers sports addict, but I tell them that there are a lot of other worse things to be addicted to."

Jennings, who grew up and still lives in Piscataway, attended his first game as a five-year-old in 1930. His father, Kenneth Jennings (RC'24), covered the Scarlet Knights for the *Home News* and often talked about a young phenom named Paul Robeson. As an undergraduate, Pete and two classmates ducked out of Saturday morning lab class when the professor turned down the lights to show slides. "Maybe it was divine intervention, but somehow we never got caught," says Jennings, a retired cardiologist who practiced in New Brunswick.

Jennings believes that he and Floyd Bragg (RC'36) have the distinction of seeing more Scarlet Knight football games than anyone else in history. "Floyd's record is more impressive because he's gone to greater lengths to get to games," says Jennings.

Bragg first began attending games while covering football for the *Daily Targum* in the mid-1930s. After graduating from Rutgers, he went to work for the Prudential Insurance Company in Newark and eventually became president of the company's Canadian operation. Although he relocated to Canada and then Minnesota, he and his wife, Helen, traveled to every single home and away game each fall for 12 years. "Following Rutgers is a habit I developed," says Bragg, who now lives in North Brunswick. "Some people wonder how I've been able to remain so dedicated through so many losing seasons over the past 10 years, but I enjoy the games, win or lose. Of course it's more enjoyable to win, and I think we are finally starting to turn the corner."



If you add all the miles that Bragg (left) and Jennings have logged traveling to football games through the years, they could have gone to the moon—and possibly Mars.

Being a Rutgers super fan doesn't even require a formal connection to the university. An avid supporter who is incapable of limiting herself to just one sport, Rita Dockray follows Scarlet Knights softball, volleyball, gymnastics, basketball, and football. "I'm a graduate of Fairleigh Dickinson, but I'm a home-grown New Jerseyan who believes in supporting the state university and our wonderful student-athletes and coaches," she says proudly.

When March roars in like a lion and the softball team plays at home, Dockray's Dodge Caravan is among the four vehicles that regularly line the grass just beyond the outfield fence, where she watches the game cocooned in a blanket. "Parents of the athletes often ask me, 'Which one is yours?'" she says. "I always tell them the same thing: 'They're all mine.'"

As the weather improves, Dockray and the other Scarlet faithful switch to lawn chairs behind home plate. "The umps prefer me and my mouth in the outfield," says Dockray, a South Bound Brook resident and member of every Scarlet Knight athletic booster club, including the President's Council. "One reason many of us are so supportive of women's sports is because we never had the opportunity to participate in these sports when we were kids."

Around the Rutgers-Camden men's and women's basketball and baseball teams, he's known as "Pops." His real name: Joe Veight, a constant at both home and away games through the tenure of three athletic directors.

"My predecessor, Pony Wilson, first spotted him on the sidelines at a Glassboro State (now Rowan University) men's basketball game," says Ed Cialella (CCAS'68), who retired as Camden's athletic department director in 2002. "He and Pony struck up a conversation, and Pops has been our most loyal fan ever since. We believe he lives in a shelter, takes the bus to campus from somewhere in Gloucester County, and survives on a military disability pension. At some point, we sort of adopted one another."

Cialella, noticing that Pops was sometimes not dressed warmly enough, invited him to the athletic department banquet six years ago and presented him with a Scarlet Raptor jacket. Jackie Trakimas, who resigned this fall after five years as Scarlet Raptor women's basketball coach, calls Pops the team's unofficial mascot and was moved when he gave the team a Valentine's Day card. "He comes in all kinds of weather and occasionally travels on the bus with us," she says. "We don't get big crowds, and he's a constant presence. You can't possibly measure what a fan like that means to us."

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