

All-Knight Repair

After more than a decade in football at Rutgers, Eric Nussbaum reflects on what it takes to be head trainer.

by Bill Glovin

all these years later, Rutgers' former head football trainer Eric Nussbaum still doesn't know what prompted him to switch places with his buddy while jogging down a quiet country road one morning. He was hit by a car in September 1980, three days after he had started his freshman year at Millersville College in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. "It was a flat and relatively deserted road," Nussbaum recalls. "I never even heard a vehicle coming."

The accident taught him that fate can change a life in new and unimagined ways. Nussbaum had planned to wrestle on the college team, but the impact of the car gave him a compound leg fracture so severe that he would never wrestle competitively again. He credits the people he met in the college's athletic training room for helping him put his life back together. "I was a history major, and maybe I would have ended up as a teacher," he speculates. "I was on crutches for all but two weeks of my freshman year, and the training room became like a second home. After I recovered, I started working as a student trainer in the athletic department and began taking anatomy courses. The rest, as they say, is history."

A large part of that history is tied to Rutgers, where he has worked as a football trainer since 1987. Through the years, he has monitored about 150 games and thousands of practices, adapted to the varied coaching styles of Dick Anderson, Doug Graber, Terry Shea, and their assistants, and seen almost every imaginable sports injury. "I knew Coach [Greg] Schiano as a graduate

NUSSBAUM USES MORE TAPE IN A WEEK THAN YOU'D FIND IN A TOMB FULL OF MUMMIES: BEFORE EACH PRACTICE AND GAME, HE AND HIS STAFF TAPE 180 ANKLES, PLUS OTHER EXTREMITIES.

assistant on Anderson's staff," says Nussbaum. "I followed his career and, when the search for a new coach was going on [last fall], I thought he might get the job." Nussbaum also knew that Schiano might bring in his own person and, in January, was reassigned when David McCune was named head trainer.

Rewind, for a moment, to last fall. On the wall above Nussbaum's desk in the Hale Center training room are signed photos from several former standouts, including Ray Lucas (RC'96) and Marco Battaglia (RC'96). Both photos contain messages thanking him for helping them stay healthy during their college careers. In the case of Lucas, now a New York Jets quarterback, Nussbaum spent countless hours helping him recover from a serious shoulder problem. "It's extremely gratifying when you work so closely with a player like Ray and he goes on to have so much success," says Nussbaum. "One of the best parts of this job is that I get to know some kids better than the coaches do. I spend more one-on-one time with them, and they tend to open up because they're frustrated," he says.

The 38-year-old Nussbaum often thinks back to his own accident, especially in cases where he's seen a career end or fizzle in the same instant it takes to fall awkwardly or absorb a brutal hit. "Take Terrell Willis, for example," he points out. "He lost just a little cartilage and bone in his knee, but it was enough to make him go from *Sporting News* Freshman of the Year to losing that little extra explosiveness that made him so special. Or the case of Garrett Shea (RC'01), who has a nerve problem in his neck. Despite hundreds of hours of treatment and all our efforts, nothing worked."

College sports training is a profession where the game clock runs both on and off the field. In careers where players have only four years to compete, the proper evaluation and treatment of an injury can mean the difference between a player realizing or never fulfilling his potential. Meanwhile, a tape job may seem routine, but whether it is done conscientiously or not might mean the difference between a team losing a valuable contributor to a twisted ankle and the team winning or losing. Job satisfaction, says Nussbaum, comes when a player has a great

game after the trainer has worked to rehabilitate his injury all week. "We don't get game balls; we compete by putting healthy players back on the field as soon as it's feasible."

With close to 100 players on a college football roster, Nussbaum must be a master juggler. His job description might read: "Evaluate and treat injuries and provide emergency care in collaboration with the team physician." But he is also part psychologist, nutritionist, and physical therapist. "Once an injury is defined, we protect the area with padding and bracing, and provide off- and on-field rehabilitation and conditioning," he explains. "We confer closely with our team doctor, Robert Monaco, and orthopedists Timothy Hosea and Michael Coyle. If further medical care is required, our role is to direct that player to the proper physician. We relay a player's condition to coaches, administrators, and parents. We meet with game officials to make

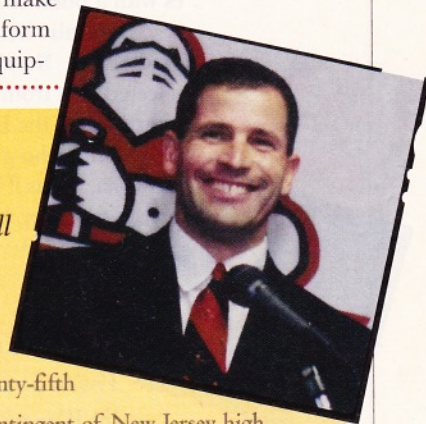
sure special padding and braces conform with the rules, we order medical equip-

“One of the best parts of this job is that I get to know some kids better than the coaches do.”

Jersey State of Mind

Within hours of being named Scarlet Knights football coach, Greg Schiano was already recruiting

Perhaps the most telling aspect of the press conference announcing Greg Schiano as the twenty-fifth head coach of Rutgers football was the large contingent of New Jersey high school football coaches lining a side wall. "They're the ones who are going to make this happen; we're in this thing together," said Schiano, 34, who met with the group before the event. Schiano, who hails from Wyckoff, is happy to be home: "Everybody in my family is from New Jersey and lives here. There couldn't be a better place to come." Schiano, his wife, Christy, their three-year-old son and one-year-old twin boys have relocated from Miami, where Schiano was defensive coordinator of the Hurricanes. Schiano played linebacker at Bucknell University, where he received a bachelor's degree in 1988. His résumé also includes coaching stints at Rutgers, Penn State, and the Chicago Bears. With a five-year contract paying Schiano \$500,000 a season, Rutgers' athletic director Bob Mulcahy is betting that his new coach will finally take the team to a bowl game. "I'm going to challenge the kids of this state," Schiano said. "There's no reason you have to leave this state to play championship football and have the success you want. Somebody's going to have to bite the bullet and say, 'I'm going to do it,' and not only do it themselves, but grab two others to come along." Helping him make that argument will be recruiting coordinator and running backs coach Mike Miello, who was Schiano's football coach at Ramapo High School.



ment and supplies, we make sure the opposition's medical team has what they need, and we even call the ice company to make sure the delivery arrives on time."

Nussbaum and assistant trainer Brent Unruh also spend considerable time training a small army of student interns, most of them exercise physiology majors interested in experiential learning. Before practices and games, interns pack ice chests and assist in the taping of as many as 170 ankles. As certified trainers, Nussbaum and Unruh are required to take about 25 hours of continuing education courses a year. "If I have a regret, it's that I didn't go to medical school," says Nussbaum. "Our orthopedists often accuse me of playing pseudo doctor."

The pseudo doctor isn't averse to trying unconventional tactics. Nussbaum learned some old-school tricks from Otho Davis and Joe Gieck, two Hall of Fame sports training mentors. Davis, a former Philadelphia Eagles trainer, taught him that sports medicine is sometimes an inexact science. "If modern methods didn't work, Otho might try pickle juice, tobacco, or some secret recipe," says Nussbaum, who sometimes treats sprains and bruises with a poultice or his own concoction of ointments.

Davis also helped him launch his career. In the summer before Nussbaum's senior year in college, Davis selected him from a pool of about 300 candidates for an internship at the Eagles' summer training camp in 1984. Nussbaum, who grew up an Eagles fan in Akron, Pennsylvania, felt as if he had won the lottery. Before his first week was over, he had taped the ankles of future Hall

of Famer defensive lineman Reggie White and quarterback Ron Jaworski. After Nussbaum graduated from Millersville the following May, Davis selected him for a paid internship that included road games and lasted through the 1985 season. Nussbaum remembers it as "the experience of a lifetime."

With professional sports training experience, Nussbaum headed for the University of Virginia in Charlottesville to pursue a master's degree in athletic training and work with the football team. There he worked closely with Gieck and Dr. Frank McCue, a nationally known sports orthopedist. Nussbaum moved to Rutgers in 1987 and, in 1994, took over as head trainer on an interim basis after Rutgers' coordinator of training services Don Kessler suffered a heart attack.

By the time Nussbaum was named head trainer permanently in 1997, he knew the type of commitment that the job required. During training camp each year in August, he works three 100-hour weeks. Once the season starts, it's a 12-hour, seven-day-a-week job. "My wife is a saint," Nussbaum says. He teeters between wistfulness and regret when he mentions his and wife Jody's two preschoolers, Harrison and Jessica. "I've certainly missed my share of birthday parties and other family events; I couldn't do this job without my wife's support."

When football starts, he's long out the door before the rest of the family rises. On practice days, Nussbaum and the medical team arrive at the Hale Center at 6:30 a.m. to begin taping and treatment. Players come and go

between meetings; the medical crew follows a small army of players, coaches, and student managers out to the field at 9:30. Halfway through the fall 2000 season, 85 players had already reported 354 injuries. More telling about the physical toll of football are the 26 surgeries that were performed during and shortly after the 1999 season.

"The trainer's role has changed somewhat since I started," Nussbaum explains. "Football is more of a year-round sport, which leads to more wear-and-tear injuries like stress fractures, tendonitis, and fatigue. Most injured players will want to play, so part of my role is to protect them from themselves by evaluating if they should be there on the field. I'm also representing their parents and the university. For that reason, trainers aren't always the most popular guy in a coach's eye, especially when a team is struggling to win. Struggling teams generally play younger kids; they feel more pressure to push themselves a little harder. Both things can lead to injuries."

As an October night game against the Tenon Owls begins, Nussbaum scours the field looking for signs that a player is in pain. Early in the game, linebacker Wes Robertson (UC'02) limps the sideline. After his knee is examined by Nussbaum, Monaco, and Coyle, he is driven on a



Call to the Hall

Vivian Stringer joins a select group as an inductee to the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame.



Rutgers women's basketball coach C. Vivian Stringer will be inducted into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame on June 8 in Knoxville, Tennessee. Stringer made history in 1999 when she became the third women's basketball coach to win 600 games and the first coach, men or women's, to lead three different schools to the Final Four. Taking the Knights to their first-ever national semifinals last season affirmed a promise she made when hired in 1995. At the time, the new coach boldly declared that she would make the Knights "the Jewel of the East" and return the team to national prominence. "Anytime you are honored by your colleagues, it's very heartwarming," says Stringer. "It's something I could have only imagined. Of course I am thrilled personally but this honor also makes me think about all the players and coaches who helped make this possible." Also to be inducted will be former Rutgers coach Theresa Grentz, Stringer's predecessor.



t to the locker room, where Unruh fits him for a knee
ce. Robertson returns in the second quarter, confers with
medical team, and reenters the game.

At halftime, Nussbaum hustles along with the play-
into the locker room. With the Scarlet Knights
and 24-7 and the atmosphere tense, he asks injured
yers how they're feeling and directs new casualties to
training room. Five minutes later he's there himself,
ng with the medical team. About 10 to 15 players
in wandering in for re-taping, help in back stretch-
or evaluation.

On the first play of the second half, senior wideout
lter King (RC'01) twists his ankle. Nussbaum and
ruh race to King and help him hobble to a training
le behind the bench. Monaco wheels over an X-ray
it while Nussbaum cuts the tape from King's ankle.
arterback Mike McMahon (RC'01) and concerned
mmates and coaches come over to check on King's
tus. The X-ray shows a high ankle sprain. Nussbaum
aps King's ankle in ice, ushers him to the bench, and
ickly resumes scouring the field.

When receiver Errol Johnson (RC'01) looks dazed

after taking a ferocious hit in the far corner of the end
zone, Nussbaum begins sprinting toward him. With
Nussbaum halfway across the field, a teammate pulls
Johnson to his feet, and the trainer retreats. Through
the course of the game, Nussbaum will sprint on and off
the field about a half-dozen times.

With a little over a minute to play and Rutgers
down 48-7, McMahon completes a long touchdown pass
to David Stringer in the end zone. Nussbaum claps
enthusiastically, and the team finally has a moment to
celebrate. "When you watch the people you work with
every day lose, it hurts," Nussbaum had said a few days
earlier at practice. "I try to stay as positive as I can."

When the final gun sounds, Nussbaum races back to
the locker room. The medical team conducts a more
detailed diagnosis of Robertson and King while other
players are evaluated; everyone is advised on how to
treat their injuries overnight. By the time Nussbaum
leaves the Hale Center, his car is almost alone in the
parking lot. He drives home to Freehold, checks on his
sleeping kids, and collapses into bed. Treatment will
begin around noon the next day.

*When Sinatra
sang "it was a
very good year,"
he might have
been thinking of
Mike Dabney,
who averaged
19.1 points per
game in the
'75-'76 sea-*