

# Built to Last

**Fred Hill Jr., coach of the Scarlet Knights men's basketball team, earned a name for his recruiting touch and personableness. Now, that talent is about to pay big dividends for Rutgers for years to come.**

**F**red Hill Jr. senses his star recruit, Mike Rosario, is growing restless waiting for his photo to be taken for *Rutgers Magazine*. "C'mon, Mike, let's shoot free throws," says the Scarlet Knights men's basketball coach. "Best of five." Rosario steps to the line and sinks four out of five. Hill, chirping about how he hasn't shot a basketball in six months, hits all five, then begins chucking up foul shots, this time left-handed. Rosario, poker faced around strangers, gives in and smiles.

The bond between coach and player is unmistakable. Rosario, the 6-3 McDonald's All-American guard who shined in three high school games at the RAC and in the celebrated all-star high school basketball game on ESPN, says: "Rutgers has struggled and some people tried to talk me out of coming. But New Jersey is home. Why go to North Carolina or Florida? The deciding factor was the look in Coach Hill's eyes, a look I didn't see anywhere else."

Before joining the Rutgers staff as associate head coach in 2005, Hill had a reputation as a formidable recruiter. At Villanova, he played a key role in recruiting the bulk of the team, which made deep runs in the NCAA tournament in 2005 and 2006. Randy Foye, a star guard at Villanova, says Hill helped him escape the hardscrabble streets of Newark, earn a college degree, and land a multimillion dollar contract as the first-round draft pick of the Minnesota Timberwolves in 2006. Guard Corey Chandler of East Side High School in Newark, the gem of Hill's 2006 Rutgers recruiting class, says one of the reasons he chose Rutgers was Hill's relationship with Foye, also an East Side graduate and one of his idols. "Coach Hill didn't tell you what he thought you wanted to hear," says Chandler. "He told

you what you needed to hear."

Mentored by his dad, Fred, who is the Scarlet Knights baseball coach, and his uncle Brian Hill, former head coach of the Orlando Magic and an assistant with the New Jersey Nets, Hill is a confident straight shooter who puts a player's interests before his own. His recruiting strategy is simple, at least to him: "Recruit young men who have been extremely well coached and come out of winning programs. Build relationships with the player and his family, coaches, teachers, friends. Then, try to be a positive force in his development. Don't take that responsibility lightly."

Hill may shun the credit, but consider the case of Quincy Douby. In his first season as Rutgers head coach in 2006, Hill could have reaped big benefits by having Douby stick around for his senior year. But he advised the Big East's leading scorer, raised in the Coney Island projects, to enter the NBA draft. Douby was a first-round draft pick of the Sacramento Kings and received a two-year, \$2.6 million contract—a fact not lost on Rosario, who says, "Coach Hill has a reputation for recruiting and developing guards."

Despite two losing seasons as head coach, Hill has grown a bumper crop of recruits, who might return the team to the NCAA tournament, in which it last appeared in 1991. Last season's 11–20 overall record and 3–15 conference record was rough, but it's a good bet that men's basketball will thrive in 2008–09, and Rutgers will compete for the Big East Conference title and likely become a top 25 team the following year.

Hill won't make such predictions. Yet, look at this year's class, ranked 19th in the nation by Scout.com. It starts with Rosario, a big reason why St. Anthony High in Jersey City finished with a 32–0 record and a number one

ranking in the *USA Today* Super 25 poll. Then there is 6-9, 260-pound Greg Echenique, rated by ESPN as the nation's number two center in the Class of 2009; 6-9 forward Christian Morris, nicknamed "The Beast" after shattering a pair of backboards; 6-6 small forward Patrick Jackson, MVP of the 2007 Eastern Invitational All-Star Game; and 6-7 forward Jonathan Mitchell, a transfer from the 2007 national champion Florida Gators (eligible to play in 2009–10) and New York's "Mr. Basketball" in 2006.

"Mike saw what Ray Rice meant for the football program, the university, and the state. He believes he can have a similar impact," says Hill. "Greg has great hands and plays with an urgency that you seldom see in a big man. They both had their pick of schools."

The infusion of all the new talent—besides making nemesis Seton Hall's basketball coach Bobby Gonzalez's head spin—will provide more versatility in game matchups and strategy. "But what I truly love is that practices will be more competitive," says Hill. "Guys will be fighting for playing time, and you earn your playing time and become a better basketball team in practice."

Rutgers got a big break when Echenique, a Venezuelan native who had



**Fred Hill Jr., left, and Mike Rosario are pictured in the College Avenue Gymnasium—aka The Barn—in New Brunswick. The gym—where the Scarlet Knights men's basketball team played until the 1977–78 season before taking up residence at the RAC on the Livingston Campus—was known to become so loud at times that paint chips fell from the ceiling. In the 1975–76 season, the team went undefeated there before advancing to the Final Four.**

made a verbal commitment to play at Rutgers in 2009, became eligible in May to enroll in 2008. Hill says that Echenique chose Rutgers over Duke despite sitting in the stands at the Duke–North Carolina matchup for the regular season Atlantic

Coast Conference title. "At the end of the day, both Mike and Greg realized that you don't take an arena, a practice facility, or a campus home with you," says Hill. "You take home lifetime relationships with the people who helped you through."