



Saving Grace

Goalkeeper Jon Conway salvages a pro career from some disappointing years. by Bill Glovin

t

he 1990 soccer season still gnaws at Rutgers' men's team. That's the year that the Knights made it all the way to the NCAA finals before losing a heartbreaker in double overtime. The team got so far largely on the strength of goalkeeper Bill Andracki (CC'91), who registered an

astounding 17 shutouts. But when it came down to the best-of-five penalty-kick phase of the championship game, Andracki saved one kick while UCLA's goalkeeper saved two, and the Bruins took home the cup. After the game, a demoralized and dejected Alexi Lalas (RC'92) sat in front of his locker and said, "We can't taste the dream anymore."

A decade later, Jon Conway (RC'00) never got past the appetizer. Now backup goalkeeper for the San Jose Earthquakes of Major League Soccer, he spent four seasons in the Knights' nets, hungry for a chance at the elusive championship. More times than he cares to recall, the outcome of a big game turned on an untimely mistake by one of his defenders, an unlucky ricochet off an opponent's post, or an unfriendly call by an official. Conway learned the hard way that in soccer, the team that dominates doesn't always win.

Last season's demise hurt the most. Going into the post-season, Conway's eyes had danced with optimism as he talked about the 1999 Knights as a team of destiny that had the potential to bring Rutgers its first national champi-

CONWAY, WHO HAS THE REFLEXES AND QUICKNESS OF A CAT, GOT HIMSELF PSYCHED FOR GAMES BY LISTENING TO MINISTRY OF SOUND, A "DANCE-TECHNO BAND FROM ENGLAND."

onship trophy. All the elements were on their side: skilled senior leadership, an infusion of talented newcomers, and Rutgers' first Big East Conference title. Perhaps most importantly, they had momentum, having won their final three games of the regular season.

Rutgers hoped to keep the momentum going through the Big East Conference Tournament, an important test before the NCAAs. The Knights received a first-round bye for winning the conference title, entered the mix in the quarterfinals, and defeated Notre Dame 2-0 at home. Having defeated Georgetown 3-0 earlier in the year, they liked their chances in the semifinals, but the Hoyas scored first and the Knights seemed snake bit, hitting the cross bar, missing a breakaway, and squandering numerous corner-kick opportunities before losing 2-0.

The Knights had one more chance to redeem themselves: an at-large bid to the NCAA tournament and a home-field advantage against Yale, but Rutgers—again—failed to capitalize on a breakaway. A bad omen occurred when the referee claimed that Rutgers' Dennis Ludwig had settled the ball with his hand before putting a shot past the Yale goalkeeper. With the goal called off, Rutgers' forwards began to press and were ruled off-side on 12 occasions. The game seemed destined to come down to penalty kicks until 21 seconds into the second overtime, when the referee awarded Yale a penalty kick for a foul. With the Knights' season hanging in the balance and the assembled crowd of 1,400 at Yurcak Field holding its collective breath, Yale's leading scorer, Jay Gould, fired a laser just beyond the outstretched arms of Conway.

The Rutgers crowd filed out of the bleachers in shock while many of the Knights fell to their knees, holding their heads in their hands. For Conway and the other seniors, it was a devastating end to their careers. In a program that has competed in three Final Fours since 1989, each year is measured by the NCAA tournament. "You play the whole season and the Big East tournament to set you up for the NCAAs," says Conway.

When he arrived at Rutgers in 1995, many of his teammates were still basking in their nearness to a national title the previous year.

The 1994 squad—which gained notoriety as the first team under head coach Bob Reasso to have a regular-season losing record—made a Cinderella run through the conference tournament and on to the national semifinals before losing to the eventual champion, the University of Virginia. After Virginia's 2-1 victory, Cavaliers' midfielder Damian Silvera admitted that, despite their win, "Today, Rutgers was the better team."

Rutgers had scored a moral victory and had reason to believe that the nucleus was in place for an NCAA title. Conway hoped to lead them to it. He'd been recruited by Rutgers after leading Sun Valley High School in Aston, Pennsylvania, to a 33-6-3 record in his junior and senior years and winning All-State honors. An added incentive was that Rutgers was the school of choice for Megan McGonagle, the goalkeeper for Sun Valley's women's team and Conway's high school sweetheart. (McGonagle, captain of the Scarlet Knights women's team in her senior year, and Conway are still an item.) "I red-shirted my first year, and practicing with such skilled players was an unbelievable learning experience," says the 6' 5," 210-pound Conway. "You can't even begin to compare the very best high school soccer competition with Division I. I had so much to learn, it wasn't even funny."

"Jon had all the tools when he came to us: size, confidence, great hands, and aggression," says Paul Blod-

A Dream Come True

Rutgers women's basketball debuts in the NCAA's Final Four.

Senior guard Shawnetta Stewart's stellar career as a Scarlet Knight came full circle as she exited the court March 31, having realized her dream of playing in a Final Four. C. Vivian Stringer—the first coach to take three separate women's college basketball programs to the championships—had promised Stewart, her first major recruit at Rutgers, that she would appear in a Final Four before she graduated. Making the experience even sweeter was the site: Philadelphia, where Stewart had starred as an All-American at University City High School. Despite Rutgers' 64-54 semifinal loss to Tennessee, the recent Rutgers College graduate—the third-round draft pick of the WNBA's Orlando Miracle—was thrilled to cap her college career before family and friends. Along the way, she and women's basketball at Rutgers earned the respect they demanded. □





gett, Rutgers' goalkeeping coach. "With all our young goalkeepers, we practically start from scratch, helping them to break bad habits and make basic skills second nature. Jon was a tireless worker and improved in every way: his strength and footwork, catching crosses, stopping

breakaways, becoming more consistent. And he gained the maturity and leadership skills that only age and experience can give."

In 1996—his first year of eligibility—Conway so impressed Reasso and Blodgett that he began splitting games with

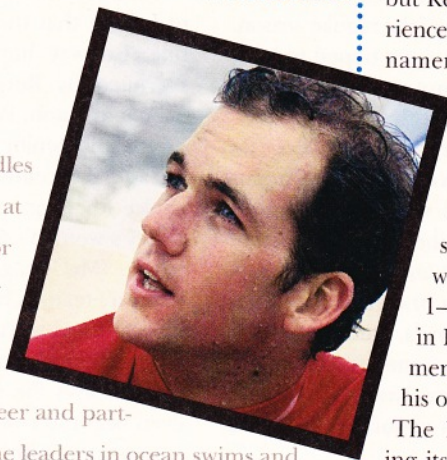
starting goalkeeper Steve Widdowson. In the season's ninth match, Conway received his first career start but left the field during the first half with a gash in his head. Four stitches later, he returned to lead Rutgers to a 1-0 victory.

Conway started the next five games, but Reasso opted to play the more experienced Widdowson in the Big East tournament. During the semifinal game against St. John's, the eventual national champion, Reasso brought Conway off the bench for the game's penalty-kick phase. Conway made two spectacular saves, Rutgers advanced, and Conway was picked to start the final, a 1-0 loss to Notre Dame. He started in Rutgers' first-round NCAA tournament game, a 2-0 win against Cornell, his only NCAA tournament career win. The 1996 squad finished 13-7-3, ending its season with a second-round loss. Conway's late-season heroics in 1996 led to his starting all but four games the following season. The Scarlet Knights improved to 14-7-2 and won the confer-

Iron Man

Sean Brennan's motto: "No train, no gain."

Six days a week Sean Brennan (Eng'97) paddles his one-person kayak on the Forked River at dawn, runs for an hour at lunch, and swims for two hours in the evening. The 25-year-old former member of the Scarlet Knights men's swim team—who fits his back-breaking training regimen around two jobs: a civilian Navy mechanical aerospace engineer and part-time Sea Girt lifeguard—consistently places among the leaders in ocean swims and iron-man events in lifesaving tournaments that are held each summer around the country. His latest achievement came last June when he defeated 553 competitors to win the ninth annual Great Chesapeake Bay Swim. □



A dream came true for Conway in January when he was drafted by the Earthquakes and won a spot on the team, thus joining the ranks of nine other former Knights who have competed professionally or have U.S. national team experience. One day he hopes to play in England, where he once got a taste of English soccer while training with the Blackburn Rovers and the national team goaltender, Tim Flowers. "Practicing with someone on that level made a huge impression," he says. "I learned about commitment, focus, consistency, all the elements that are crucial to success."

Conway will stay involved in Rutgers soccer through the lifelong friends he's made on the team. Not to mention that his brother, Scott—another Scarlet Knights goalkeeper—is expected to battle Ricky Zinter and J. D. Martin for the honor of succeeding him. "In all of college soccer last year, I rated Jon second only to Adin Brown of William & Mary," says Reasso. "Whoever our goalkeeper is this year, he'll have huge shoes to fill." Jon Conway may not have tasted the dream, but such high praise might take a little of the edge off his hunger. □

ence tournament, but were eliminated 1-0 in the first round of the NAAs. Conway, however, had begun to emerge as one of the nation's top collegiate goalkeepers. He was named First Team All-Big East and spent the spring semester training with the United States Under 20 National Team.

Conway's breakout year was 1998. He played every second of every game, surrendered only 19 goals in 21 games, and was named conference Goalkeeper of the Year. But with a record of 12-7-2, the Knights narrowly missed being selected for the NAAs—a disaster, considering that the team routinely competes in the national tournament. Last season Conway and his teammates came into the pre-season determined to prove that 1998 had been a fluke. And they succeeded, winning their first conference championship with an 8-1-2 record.

"It was an amazing ride," says Conway. "I was fortunate to have stayed relatively injury free, and even more fortunate to have had such great players