

Playing to Win

Scarlet Knights quarterback Mike McMahon has one goal for his collegiate football career—to leave Rutgers with a winning program.

Scarlet Knights quarterback Mike McMahon (RC'01) knows that the harder he works off the field, the easier time he'll have on it. That's why, although it's the off-season and he's still recovering from recent arthroscopic knee surgery, the 6' 3," 205-pound sophomore is pumping iron in the Hale Center weight room. "There were times this past season when my knee was so sore that I doubted I could play," says McMahon as he completes a set of lat pulls. "It definitely affected my mobility. And my right wrist wasn't right all year. I can't wait until I'm healthy again."

The quarterback's medical maladies may be slow to heal, but his team made a miraculous recovery from last year's 0-11 debacle. Despite a slow start this year, the Scarlet Knights surprised the experts by finishing the season at 5-6 and recording the second-best turnaround of any Division I football program in the country. The season was considered so successful that head coach Terry Shea was named Big East Conference Coach of the Year and received a contract extension. Shea believes that one of the keys to the turnaround was McMahon. "One important quality for any quarterback is durability," says Shea. "Mike showed his toughness by playing through some injuries and taking every snap from center this year."

McMahon, in just a season and a half as the starter, is on course to break every passing

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record in Scarlet Knight history. He is already seventh on the all-time passing list with 3,462 yards and sixth on the list with 247 completions. But statistics are not what motivates him. "Winning is the only thing that matters," he says. "I want to be a building block for a successful program that will flourish long after I'm gone."

A native of Wexford, Pennsylvania, McMahon was raised with his two older sisters in one of the most rabid football regions in the country. He attended North Allegheny High School, a football powerhouse that has drawn as many as 9,000-plus fans to a game. Despite starring in football since the sixth grade, McMahon didn't start on the high school varsity team until his senior year. And even that was in jeopardy when he broke his leg in his last junior varsity game.

That spring McMahon was well enough to attend a combine for western Pennsylvania standouts held at his high school, where his ability caught the eye of Rutgers coach Dave Steckel. Steckel invited the teenager to attend a quarterbacks camp at Rutgers that summer. Coach Shea's knowledge of the quarterback position made a huge impression on McMahon, who, in turn, impressed the Rutgers coaches with his physical tools and maturity. Still, they weren't about to offer a scholarship to a player who had yet to start in a high school game.

But McMahon won the starting position on the varsity squad and, based on film of his first three games, Rutgers offered him a football scholarship. By the time the season ended, he had been named first-team All-State, had played in the Pennsylvania state championship game in Three Rivers Stadium (home of the Pittsburgh Steelers), and had received scholarship offers from Syracuse, Miami, and Notre Dame.

"I came to Rutgers because I knew I'd have the opportunity to compete for the job, learn from a coach who literally wrote a book on the quarterback position, and maybe be one of the catalysts that turned the program around," says McMahon. "At those other schools, I'd redshirt my first year, probably sit for the next two years, and then, if I won the

starting job, be just another cog in the wheel at a football factory."

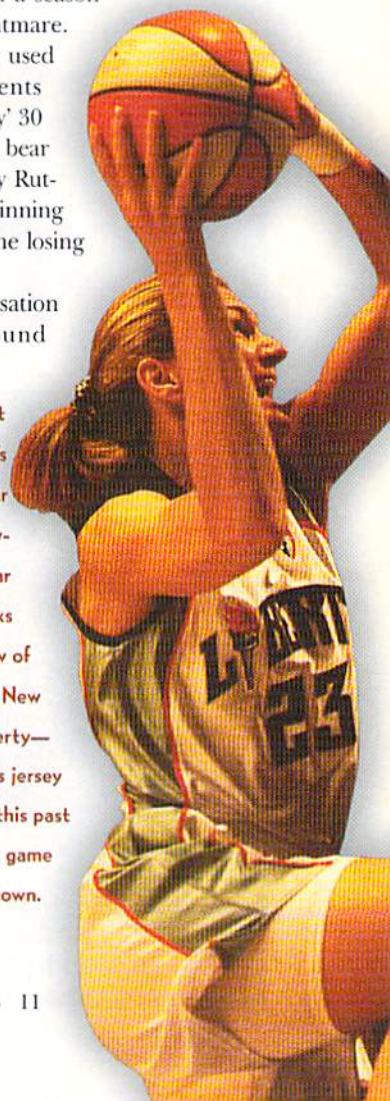
Shea considered redshirting the freshman in 1997, but McMahon, sensing that there was no solid incumbent at the quarterback position, talked him out of it.


After making an uneventful debut against Navy, McMahon almost led a miracle comeback in the second half of the Boston College game when he drove the offense down the field for two scores in a matter of minutes. Against Army, McMahon, making his first start, threw for 386 yards, the second-best passing day in Rutgers history. By the end of the year, he led the nation's true freshmen quarterbacks with 1,259 passing yards, threw for six touchdowns, and was trumpeted by the media as the Scarlet Knights' quarterback of the future.

McMahon turned out to be the silver lining in the dark cloud of an 0-11 campaign, but his personal accomplishments and the poise he demonstrated as a freshman meant little in a season that had turned into a nightmare. "In high school, we were so used to dominating our opponents that if we beat a team by 'only' 30 points, the coach made us do bear crawls," he says. "Most of my Rutgers teammates came from winning high school programs, and the losing ate us up inside."

McMahon treats conversation about 1997 like a 240-pound blitzing

Former Scarlet Knights women's basketball star and College Player of the Year Sue Wicks (RC'88)—now of the WNBA's New York Liberty—had her Rutgers jersey retired at this past December's game against Georgetown.



 **BOX SCORE**

Both the men's and women's Scarlet Knights basketball programs have signed several top high school prospects to national letters of intent. On the men's side, the recruits include Josh Moore of Newark, a 7' 0," 280-pound center who currently attends St. Thomas More Prep School in Oakdale, CT; Sean Axani, a 6' 7," 220-pound power forward from Red Bank Regional High School; Todd Billet, a 6' 1," 180-pound guard and younger brother of Scarlet Knight Geoff Billet from Christian Brothers Academy in Middletown; and Kareen Wright, a 6' 9," 310-pound center who attends Mercersburg Academy in Mercersburg, PA. Joining the women's team will be Kourtney Walton, a 6' 0" guard from John Marshall High School in Chicago, and Mauri Horton, a 5' 8" guard from North High in Minneapolis.

season was a step in the right direction, he's anything but satisfied: "Some people were happy when we opened the season by breaking the losing streak against Richmond, a Division AA team, 7-6, but I'd hardly call that an accomplishment."

For him, the season's

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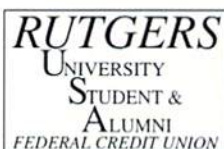
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turning point came in the sixth game on the road against Pittsburgh, when he threw two touchdown passes in the second half and the Scarlet Knights came back to win 25-21. "We got pushed around in the first half of that game, but our offensive line turned it around and we did a better job for the rest of the year," he says. The last two contests, losses to Virginia Tech and West Virginia, he views as lost opportunities: "If we'd won those games, we probably would have gone to a bowl."

If Rutgers is ever to get there—a dream that has eluded the program since 1978—the quarterback, who sets the tone in the huddle and handles the football more than all of his teammates combined, will have to lead the way. "I'm not real vocal, but I try to lead by example," says McMahon. "That means not missing workouts, hitting the books, keeping partying to a minimum, and doing more than the coaches require. We took major steps this year, but our overall level of maturity still needs to improve. Too

many players think this is about fun. It will be a lot of fun if we win."

In assessing the quarterback, both McMahon and his coach agree that he needs to cut down on the 16 interceptions that he threw in 1998, improve his footwork, and break the habit of sometimes throwing with a three-quarters motion. "Mike's separation time from the line of scrimmage is as good as that of any quarterback I've ever seen," says Shea. "He has exceptional arm strength and throws as well on the move as he does from the pocket. Mike's confidence, his passion to win, and his athleticism and maturity are the qualities that we hope will lead us to a bowl or a Big East Conference championship."

But in football, the ultimate team sport, McMahon knows the Scarlet Knights will need a solid recruiting class if the team is to achieve its goals. Most of their competition in the Big East have larger players than Rutgers on their defensive lines. "For starters, we need to

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recruit a pair of monster tackles and replace senior receivers Billy Powell (LC'99) and Chris Hutton (LC'99)," he says. The coming months are crucial. For part of the next few weekends, McMahon and his teammates will be meeting high school standouts and their parents who are coming to Rutgers for recruiting sessions. Their choice of school, says McMahon, will partly hinge on the impression the Scarlet Knights give of themselves, the football program, and the University.

"We're doing a better job of recruiting the state's football talent and marketing the Rutgers name, but we need to create a Penn State or West Virginia-like atmosphere so that kids dream about someday wearing a Rutgers jersey," says McMahon, whose sister Shelly is a senior at Penn State. "We have a lot to offer: a great academic reputation; a top conference in a major media market; driving

and train distance to New York, Philadelphia, Atlantic City, and the Jersey shore; and a beautiful stadium. Plus, in our system, we shuffle a lot of players in and out so it's likely that they'll get a chance to play early in their careers."

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A recruiting obstacle and a frustrating factor for everyone associated with the program, McMahon believes, is the lukewarm fan support. "Unfortunately, home

field is not that big of an advantage for us," he says. "The empty seats and the lack of noise hurts the intensity on the field and affects everything. In most of the stadiums we play in, the noise from the crowd often makes changing plays at the line of scrimmage and hearing in the huddle difficult for the visitors. It makes a big difference."

At Virginia Tech, Syracuse, and Miami, says McMahon, the crowd's energy manifests in a sudden adrenalin surge on the line of scrimmage and a fire in their opponents' eyes. The noise, chants, and taunts aren't closely matched by those he hears at Rutgers Stadium. "Football is a game where the win often comes down to who wants it more," he explains. "If New Jersey wants us to succeed, they need to show us that they're willing to come out and support us. Is it unrealistic to dream about someday looking up and seeing a sell-out?" □

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