

## Fall Preview

It's a blistering hot summer day, and quarterback Mike Teel is sweating just standing there, all alone, inside cavernous Rutgers Stadium. When the stadium is packed this fall, Teel will be feeling a different, even hotter, kind of heat: the heat that a football team puts on its quarterback, especially after its fans have basked in the glory of the national spotlight.

Yeah, Heisman Trophy candidate Ray Rice is important. So is All-American defensive tackle Eric Foster. But, if the Scarlet Knights are going to take the Big East Conference title and get to a Bowl Championship Series game, Teel must shine in 2007.

It's a good bet that he will. After all, he's got a full year of playing experience now—plus the momentum of his final three games of 2006, when Teel came on like gangbusters. After struggling for parts of last season, and hearing the boos at home, Teel, a redshirt junior, responded by completing 65.2 percent of his passes for 692 yards and five touchdowns in the last three games. Amazingly, he didn't throw an interception, after being picked off 13 times in the first 10 games.

"You can't beat experience," he says. "As the season progressed, I did things that I didn't do well early on, like getting the play from the sidelines, bringing it into the huddle, and making sure we had enough time on the play clock at the line of scrimmage."

Teel enters 2007 brimming with confidence. The team and coaches believe in him, he senses, support that is a prerequisite. "A quarterback needs to be a leader," he says. "Only through playing consistently well can you become one." He showed some backbone last season when he didn't duck responsibility after throwing

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# The Man of Teel

**He doesn't have to be superhuman, not with Ray Rice around. But QB Mike Teel has to border on immortality if the Scarlet Knights are going to make it to a BCS game.**



Teel

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four interceptions against Cincinnati. After the devastating loss, the team's first, coming just a week after the huge win over Louisville, he took the tough questions from the media.

Teel, a classic 6-4 drop-back quarterback, is more durable, he says, because of all the off-season hours in the weight room. He also did time working on his foot speed to make him more nimble in the pocket, from which he rarely strays. "Everyone is gunning for the quarterback," says Teel. "In my first year, I didn't push myself enough. I'm stronger and more mobile now."

Busting his tail during spring and summer practices, Teel plans to pick up where he left off late last season, throwing to sophomore wideouts Kenny Britt and Tim Brown. In the 37-10 Texas Bowl blowout over Kansas State, Teel completed six passes to the pair, including a 49-yard bomb to Brown. His go-to guy early in the season, junior Tiquan Underwood, is ready to fly again, now that he's recovered from breaking his leg against West Virginia. A better air attack means everything because opposing teams are going to be coming hard to stop Rice.

With the team's 2006 11-2 record and a top 20 preseason ranking, Teel knows that Rutgers won't be sneaking up on anybody anymore. There are expectations now; they are the team to beat. It's nothing new for him. "In high school, I didn't lose a single game; pressure and high expectations have always been part of the mix," says Teel, recalling his career at Don Bosco Prep in Ramsey. "In my first two seasons at Rutgers, we lost seven and then five games. Last year we lost twice. My goal—no, make that *our* goal—is to win every game."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK ROMANENKO

# Bowled Over

Last year's football team came oh, so close to a big-time bowl game. This season, Rutgers is going places. How far? Count the clichés.

The 2006 11-2 Scarlet Knights, defeated by West Virginia in triple overtime in the final regular season test, were a play away from a dramatic win—and an invitation to a Bowl Championship Series game. With 14 starters returning, plus a recruiting class being called "best ever," Rutgers is going places. Have you heard the phrase Rose Bowl?

**The Red Zone:** What was more dramatic: the skyline over Manhattan on November 9 when the Empire State Building beamed scarlet to honor the Knights' game against Louisville? Or was it Rutgers' victory over the Cardinals, the biggest, well, ever? Indeed, the Red Zone was the team's happy place last year, as it cashed in on 79 percent of its chances inside opponents' 20. Look for more this year, thanks in part to first-team All-American senior tackle Eric Foster.



**Smash Mouth Football:** It ain't pretty, but it is what it is: effective. Who wouldn't give Heisman candidate Ray Rice the damn ball? He ran for 1,794 yards last year, averaging 5.4 yards a pop, and he scored 20 TDs. Expect bigger numbers, with the return of three O-line starters. Freshman Anthony Davis—6-6, 345 pounds—will create running lanes wider than Route 18 (on a good day).

**It's Up—and It's Good!:** Kicker Jeremy Ito rocked New Jersey like Springsteen on steroids when he got a redo against Louisville, sealing the deal with his 28-yard game-winner. If Mr. Cool Foot improves on 22 out of 29 field goals, including his two of three from over 50 yards, he's NFL-bound next year. The best kicker and leading scorer in Knights' history, the senior should see more kickoffs downed for touchbacks—a solid 38 percent last year.

**Statue of Liberty:** With all the time QB Mike Teel had to pass last season, it's a wonder that a patina of oxidized copper didn't settle over him. In 13 games last season, Teel was sacked only eight times—tops in college football. The big test? Louisville and West Virginia, two teams with ferocious pass rushes. Teel's breakout game in the Texas Bowl (268 yards passing and two TDs) is just the beginning of what he's capable of.

**Nickel Defense:** If Rutgers had a nickel for every pundit's comment about its porous secondary going into last season, it could install even more seats at Rutgers Stadium to handle growing demand. Last year, the secondary picked off 15 passes and was rock-solid on third downs. Safeties Courtney Greene and Ron Girault are back, in on 151 tackles last season and deemed one of the nation's best tandems.

**Fly Pattern:** As much as private aircraft might be tempted to buzz over Rutgers Stadium this fall, only paying customers in the stands will appreciate sophomore receivers Kenny Britt and Tim Brown. Britt is long and agile, and Brown may be the fastest player to ever wear scarlet. Throw in steady Tiquan Underwood and the passing game will give the offense much-needed balance.

**Home Field Advantage:** The Knights rocketed to a 9-0 start last season. Opening this season with a five-game home stand at Rutgers Stadium won't hurt a chance at a repeat performance. Home games to watch: the University of Maryland will be the best out-of-conference test (September 29), and the Knights will try to avenge last season's two in-conference losses to Cincinnati (October 6) and West Virginia (October 27).