



The Ties that Bind

Two former Scarlet Knights teammates are rooting hard for one another in the NFL. *by Bill Glavin*

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hen young people perform in front of thousands of people, good chemistry can be the intangible that makes all the difference. In the summer between their freshman and sophomore years, Ray Lucas (RC'96) and Marco Battaglia (RC'96) worked side by side as landscapers. Both had redshirted in 1991 and had yet to play a regular-season football game for the Scarlet Knights. "We were both very competitive, even when it came to seeing who could weed-whack the fastest," says Battaglia. "But Ray wasn't much competition." When Lucas is told of Battaglia's recollection of his tortoise-like pace, he counters with, "I remember beating Marco so badly that I was back in the van with the air conditioner on while he was still working."

Though they didn't realize it then, their time as landscapers was helping them develop the chemistry that would make them one of the most potent quarterback-receiver combinations in Rutgers history. Today, their admiration for one another is considerable and their friendship intact. This summer, as established veterans of the National Football League, both are involved in training camps that may help determine how their professional careers play out.

"I'm very proud of them," says Mose Rison, a former Scarlet Knights assistant coach who recruited both players in 1991. Now the receivers coach for the New York Jets, Rison remembers Battaglia and Lucas as hard working and driven to succeed. "I've seen a lot of great



athletes come and go; the fact that they've been in the NFL for five years says a lot," Rison adds. "And I really believe that their best football is still ahead of them."

In December, Lucas signed a \$2.75 million, three-year contract with the Miami Dolphins. Based on a successful nine-game stint as starting quarterback for the Jets in 1999, Lucas believes he can start in the NFL. He probably could have signed with New England for more money but figured his chances to play in Miami were better. "The money is secondary," says Lucas. "I'll do whatever it takes to contribute, including playing on special teams again."

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career with the Cincinnati Bengals, is going into the final year of a three-year, \$2 million-plus contract. As mostly a backup tight end and special teams player, he feels his skills have not yet been used properly. He's also frustrated by his team's 11-37 record over the last three seasons. "Our offense hasn't used the tight end as a primary pass catcher, which was particularly frustrating since the head coach for my first several years was Bruce Coslet, a former tight end," says Battaglia. Not helping matters has been adjusting to a new head coach and two different position coaches and six different quarterbacks in five seasons.

If you're a fan of Howard Stern, it's likely that you've heard some of the intimate details of Battaglia's life discussed on the radio. Battaglia and Stern work out together on and off at an upscale New York City gym. While Battaglia is speaking with a reporter there, Stern appears in the doorway and says, "We missed you today. When are you leaving for Cincinnati?" Last year Lucas and his wife, Cecy, met Stern at Battaglia's wedding. "My getting married was a topic on the show for awhile," says Battaglia, whose wife, Maria, recently gave birth to their daughter.

After graduating from Rutgers with a degree in sociology, Battaglia's prospects in the professional ranks seemed greater than Lucas's. Drafted high in the sec-

ond round in 1996 by the Bengals, Battaglia routinely drew professional scouts to Piscataway—and the fans to their feet. A consensus First Team All-American and Big East Offensive Player of the Year as a senior, he rewrote the Rutgers record books. Among his accomplishments: first all-time in catches (171) and 100-yard games (7) and second in receiving yards (2,221) and touchdowns (16). Against nationally ranked rival Penn State on national television in 1995, Battaglia made 13 catches for 185 yards, a performance etched in the memory of every Scarlet Knights fan. "Marco was faster than any tight end in the Big East," says Lucas. "He had great hands and broke tackles. On a broken play, I'd throw the ball in his direction and it seemed like he'd always come down with it."

Battaglia put on his first set of pads as a seven-year-old. "We played tackle [football] on concrete, and I would wear my uniform to bed," he says. "When I was on the junior varsity baseball team, I remember the coach stopping practice one day and saying, 'Battaglia, you're going to be the guy on the bar stool one day who will be reminiscing about what might have been if you had worked harder.' It's funny how that always stuck in my mind. In college, I'd still hear that voice in my head."

At St. Francis High School in Queens, Battaglia led his team to three consecutive city championships, was named New York City Prep High School Player of the Year as a senior, and was besieged by recruiters. A summer football camp at Rutgers, where he met and roomed with Lucas, sold him on the school. "I learned from the leaders on that team when I came in," he recalls, reeling off the names of about a half-dozen mentors. "Off the field, my recruiting class visited each other's homes and did practically everything together. Eventually, I learned a very important lesson: You don't play for you; you play for the guy next to you."

Battaglia matured into a team leader, both at Rutgers and with the Bengals, where he has been special teams captain for the past three years. Last year he started 12 games at tight end and was on the field for 50 percent of the offensive snaps. He calls himself "a much better blocker than I was in college," but points out that "Shannon Sharpe makes the Pro Bowl because he catches 70-plus balls a year, not because of his blocking." Still, he takes some satisfaction in knowing that blocking has helped running back Corey Dillon rush for close to 5,000 yards over the past four seasons. "I hardly call what we do work," says Battaglia. "My cousin arrives at his job at a meat company on the West Side Highway at 2 a.m. He's in bed by six every night. He's done it for 20 years. That's work."

When Lucas hears his buddy's assessment, he's also careful to put football in the proper context. "We've got to count our blessings that we've been able to make our livelihoods doing something we love," he says. "But pro football is a 'here today, gone tomorrow' type of business. I never forget that."

Before Rison recruited Lucas, he remembers hearing that the outstanding three-sport athlete had a questionable attitude. "I took a ride to Harrison, talked to people, and found out that he was one of the most popular kids in the school," says Rison. "Harrison is a small high school, but by the time Ray was a senior, other recruiters knew that he was special, and we were competing with schools like Penn State and Virginia for him."



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says Battaglia. Adds Lucas, "It certainly would be fun to see what we could do."

Before games, Battaglia (top) likes to watch the film Braveheart. Lucas says that two of his favorite activities are sleeping and going to the beach.

Lucas, who scored more than 2,000 points in his high school hoops career, considered basketball scholarships until he realized that larger schools wanted him for football. Rutgers, he says, offered excellent academics and a chance to play as an underclassman. "At most schools, you don't even get a chance to step onto the field until your junior year," he says. "At Rutgers, competition for the quarterback job was wide open."

In Lucas's first season on the field in 1992, he threw for close to 1,000 yards and the team finished 7-4, Rutgers' second-best record in the last 20 years. Despite competition for playing time with Miami Hurricanes transfer Bryan Fortay (RC'94), Lucas—a criminal justice major—ended his career as Rutgers' second all-time passing leader. He is also first all-time in touchdowns (43), second all-time in completions (514) and passing yards (5,896), and third all-time in 300-plus passing-yard games. As a senior, he won the Touchdown Club Trophy for leadership, performance, dedication, and on-the-field impact. "Few could improvise like Ray, and we seemed to know instinctively what the other was going to do," remembers Battaglia. "I can't ever recall coming back to the huddle thinking, 'Boy, Ray crossed me up that time.' The fact that he was so athletic and

not your traditional stay-in-the-pocket passer hurt him in the eyes of professional scouts."

When Lucas wasn't drafted, he phoned New England Patriots Coach Bill Parcells and asked for a try-out. "At Rutgers, we didn't allow Ray to hold for extra points because he might get hurt," says Rison. "To make the Patriots as a backup receiver or special teams player, Ray had to be willing to throw his body around like a kamikaze. It's a whole different mind-set that not too many former quarterbacks can adjust to." Lucas didn't make the team, but his competitiveness impressed Parcells, who decided to allow him to continue practicing. Eventually, Lucas got his chance to play on special teams and, by the time his rookie year ended, he had played in Super Bowl XXXI.

In the off season, Parcells fell out with Patriots owner Bob Kraft, became coach of the Jets, and took several players with him, including Lucas. One day Parcells asked Lucas to step in as scout team quarterback. As the 1997 season progressed, Lucas was used to run a handful of plays in real games. Two seasons later his break came when starter Vinnie Testaverde tore his Achilles tendon in the season opener and backup Rick Mirer faltered. With the Jets at 1-6, Parcells turned to Lucas, who helped the team win three straight games. When the team fell a win short of making the playoffs, Parcells lamented that he should have turned to Lucas sooner.

Claiming burnout, Parcells resigned as coach at the end of the 1999 season. The new coach, Al Groh, announced that Testaverde was his starting quarterback—much to the chagrin of Lucas supporters. Two months later the Jets selected quarterback Chad Pennington in the first round of the draft. Last season Lucas watched mostly from the bench. When he did get into a game, the team was usually behind or back on its heels. "The Jets didn't draft Pennington so he could sit around," says Lucas. "The writing was on the wall."

Lucas and Battaglia believe this season offers both of them the chance to start fresh. Lucas, who recently moved with his wife and two daughters from New Jersey to Miami, knows it will be difficult to displace incumbent Jay Fiedler but is willing to go back to special teams to get on the field. Meanwhile, Battaglia and new Bengals coach Dick LeBeau met before the season. "LeBeau told me that when he was with Pittsburgh, they almost drafted me," he says. "I'm told that I'll be given the opportunity to make more plays under our new offensive coordinator. That's all I'm asking for."

Not surprisingly, their dream is to be reunited on the field one day. "Even if it's in the twilight of our careers, I would love to have one season together," says Battaglia. Adds Lucas, "It certainly would be fun to see what we could do. The main thing is that we're still such good friends and that I'll always be willing to teach him a few new landscaping tricks."