

## Family Ties

Todd Billet's decision to follow his brother Geoff to Rutgers took a welcome, but short-lived turn when Geoff became his coach.

Now both are leaving The Banks.

*By Bill Clovin*

**it** was a few minutes into the second half in the Meadowlands and the Scarlet Knights basketball team was on the verge of getting blown out against rival Seton Hall. Seated behind the Rutgers bench were Lew and Noreen Billet, the parents of point guard Todd, 20, and assistant coach Geoff, 24. Not only were they not giving up, but Noreen was ready to singlehandedly take out a large, obnoxious Pirate fan.

Not helping matters was Todd (RC'03), normally a significant part of the offense and the team's leading scorer. So far he had shot one for six and turned the ball over twice. When Rutgers called a time out, Geoff (RC'99) saddled up to his younger brother and got in his ear.

Todd listened attentively and nodded. Out of the time out, he dribbled to his right and buried an 18-footer near the baseline. Moments later he hit a three-pointer off a high screen. Suddenly, Rutgers was getting defensive stops. Todd couldn't miss, and the loud Pirate fan was sit-

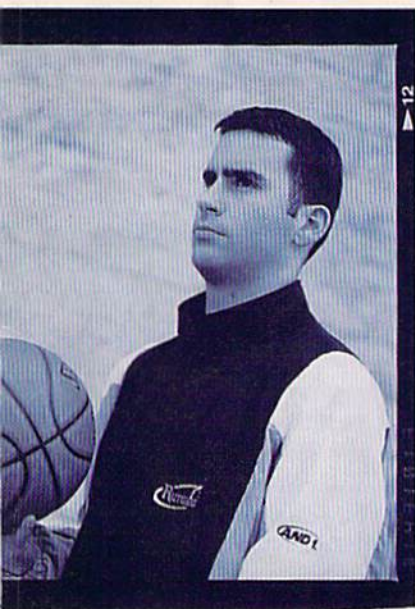
ting in stunned silence. In less than seven minutes, Todd scored 16 points, which included converting five of six key foul shots. Holding the ball as the buzzer sounded, he tossed it into the air to celebrate his team's finally pulling out a close game and breaking into the Big East Conference win column.

Afterward, Geoff was asked what he said to his brother during the timeout. "I told him to forget the first half and stay aggressive," he said. "I reminded him that a few days earlier Duke's Jason Williams had 10 turnovers and a terrible first half against Maryland, then came back in the second half to score 20 points and lead Duke to a great comeback win in overtime."

Little did the brothers know at the time that before the spring semester would end, Rutgers head coach Kevin Bannon would be dismissed, Kent State coach Gary Waters hired, and that they would both be headed elsewhere.

While Rutgers fans are optimistic that Waters will be the one to finally turn the program around, they are also disappointed that the Billets reunion ended prematurely.





With Geoff (right) watching from the bench, Todd led the Big East Conference in three-pointers.

Most were delighted when Todd—recruited intensely by Virginia, Clemson, and Princeton as one of the top high school point guards in the nation—committed to Rutgers. But some thought Todd might be better off going to a school where he wouldn't be measured against Geoff's lofty accomplishments. "Todd was confident that he would succeed any-

where; I stayed out of it," said Geoff. Said Todd, "Geoff never pushed me towards Rutgers. I thought I'd have a chance to play right away at Rutgers and liked the idea of brothers wearing the same number (No. 22) at one school. How often does that happen? Rutgers will be a bond we'll have for the rest of our lives."

Geoff, who started all four years and finished ninth on the Rutgers all-time scoring list and first all-time in three pointers made, graduated with a 3.3 GPA in economics in 1999. He considered playing overseas, but couldn't pass up an assistant's job at Monmouth University and then at Rutgers. "It's a big transition and a little frustrating because a coach has limited input; he can teach, advise, and cajole, but in the end, it's up to the players to perform," said Geoff, who is still getting used to wearing suits.

Geoff has kept a close eye on his brother's game since the day Todd first picked up a basketball. Geoff played as a teenager against the likes of Stephon Marbury at all-star games and camps, where he learned what it took to play at a high level. "In high school, I was outside taking 300 shots in strength shoes in the blazing heat one summer day and Todd was in front of the TV," said Geoff. "I told Todd that if he didn't start working harder, he'd never play at my level. He was angry but got the message."

"Most kids think it's enough to play a lot of basketball with their friends, but Geoff taught me that I needed to work on aspects of my game every day by myself," said Todd. "I picked up a hundred little things from watching Geoff—how he used screens to get open or find the open man when he was double teamed; his approach to big games; the kinds of exercises and drills he used to make himself sharper and stronger."

Like Geoff, the little things helped turn

Todd into one of the Big East Conference's most feared outside shooters; someone other teams keyed on. "I told Todd after his freshman year that he needed more range on his shot and to work at finding his way into the lane more to keep the defense honest," said Bannon during the season. "He also needed to be stronger and more vocal. He did all those things."

Their standout careers at Christian Brothers Academy (CBA) in Lincroft are the stuff of New Jersey basketball lore. Said CBA coach Ed Wicelinski: "The only thing Geoff and Todd ever dunked was a doughnut into coffee. A very good player once asked me why big-time programs were recruiting Geoff and not him. He later said, 'In terms of hard work, Geoff is just nuts.' But that's what it takes. I've seen a hundred players with their physical ability, but none that worked harder than those two."

Wicelinski recalled that Geoff's first-team, all-state status drew a lot of Division 1 coaches to CBA games, but that many were turned off by his lack of height and an unorthodox hitch in his shot. As a Rutgers freshman, Geoff quieted the skeptics not only by winning a starting job and launching his career as Big East Co-Rookie of the Week, but also by being named to the conference's All-Rookie Team at the end of the season. As a junior, his buzzer-beater shot against Georgetown in the 1998 Big East Tournament put the Knights in the semifinals.

Rarely do brothers commit to the same school. For example, Jeff Greer (RC'01), brother of Pittsburgh's Ricardo Greer, and former assistant coach Danny Hurley, brother of former Duke All-American and NBA guard Bobby Hurley, are among brother tandems that chose different schools. "Geoff and Todd are a special case," said Danny, who starred at Seton Hall and is two years younger than Bobby. "They never played together on the same

## box scores

### FOOTBALL

Ridgewood native Paul Ferraro has been named defensive coordinator of the Scarlet Knights football team. Ferraro, who spent the past two seasons as the defensive backs coach at Georgia Tech, was defensive coordinator at Bowling Green from 1991-98.

### BASKETBALL

The New Jersey Athletic Conference named two Rutgers basketball coaches as Coach of the Year: Jackie Trakinas, for helping the Scarlet Raptors improve from 5-19 a year ago to 15-8 this season, and Chris Casey, who led the Scarlet Raiders to a 14-10 record and its first ECAC tourna-

ment appearance in five years.

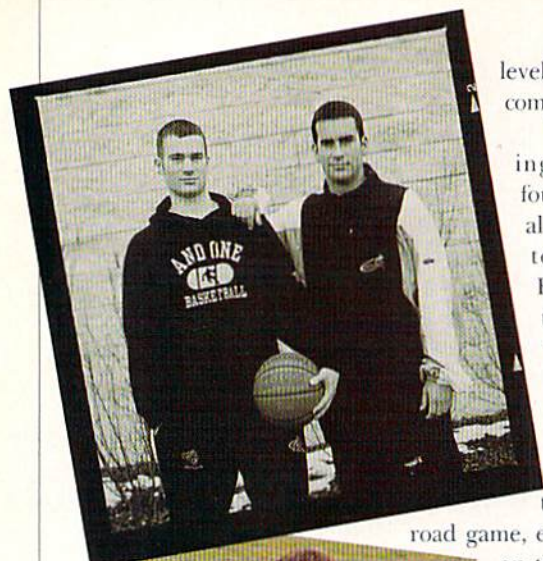
### WOMEN'S FENCING

Scarlet Knight sophomore Alexis Jemal, who had a 30-3 record this season, took home a bronze medal in the saber division at the Junior Olympics.

### SWIMMING

Freshman Samantha Caetano set a new Big East and Scarlet Knights record in the women's 200-yard freestyle at the Big East Championships. Junior Brendan Larcy, senior Stefan Pinter, and freshman Nathan Ilnicki also established a new Big East and Rutgers record in the men's 200-yard medley.





Todd (left) and Geoff, photographed together since they were kids, sometimes commiserated for hours after games.

level, which makes them less competitive with each other."

When it came to recruiting Todd, Bannon also found himself in an unusual position. "I didn't have to sell Rutgers to the Billets, but there was still the issue of whether Todd should experience something different," he recalled.

Lew and Noreen Billet, who were a fixture at every home and road game, enjoyed having both sons on the same team. The couple, who met in college, have basketball in their blood. Noreen is the daughter of George Leahy, an all-city player at St. Francis Prep in Brooklyn in the 1930s. Lew, a senior vice president at Automatic Data Processing, played on the freshman team at Villanova. Lew and Noreen scoffed at the notion that they did

anything special for their boys, but both sons said that their parents did indeed make considerable social and financial sacrifices. "Instead of a Saturday night out with friends, they were usually driving us home from prac-

tice or to a game or a camp," said Geoff. "And a lot of that takes money."

While their future plans are still in flux, Geoff and Todd will always have this past season to reflect on. "I've had a great two years here; I don't regret coming here at all," Todd told the *Star-Ledger*. "I'll be leaving behind a lot of good friends and memories. This is the school I picked out of high school. I love the school and it's hard leaving." The soft-spoken guard leaves with a 3.7 GPA.

Their biggest regret is that they weren't able to turn things around at Rutgers, something they both hungered for. Geoff spoke proudly that in each of his four years as a Knight, the team's record improved. Before Todd made the decision to transfer, his eyes lit up when he talked about next year's recruiting class and his goal of helping Rutgers reach the NCAA tournament. "Todd has always been incredibly optimistic and takes losing very hard," said a family friend. "He felt that with a new coach and only two years of eligibility left, there wasn't going to be an instant turnaround."

Todd's disdain for losing is a reason Geoff had routinely turned down his brother's challenges to play one-on-one. "Then one day I finally said, 'Let's go,'" recalled Geoff. "I was a junior in college and Todd was a junior in high school, and he actually had the nerve to think he could beat me. But that's Todd. It was a best of five, and when I scored the final point and won, Todd punted the ball over the house and cracked my mother's favorite table. Todd took off on a 10-mile run, partly to vent and partly so he wouldn't have to explain it when Mom came home. I'm still not sure she knows the truth about that table."

## Special Knights

*Two former Rutgers standouts had roles in this year's Super Bowl.*

**H**arry Swayne (LC'90) and Reggie Stephens viewed Super Bowl XXXV in Tampa Bay from very different perspectives. Swayne, a veteran of 14 NFL seasons, started at offensive tackle for the Baltimore Ravens, while defensive back Stephens, a valuable contributor in his second season, participated in New York Giants practices and helped prepare the receivers for the game. Each hoped to make mincemeat of the other's team.

Swayne, whose Ravens beat the Giants 34-7, could tell Stephens a thing or two about perseverance. After an outstanding career at Rutgers, Swayne was drafted by Tampa Bay in 1987 in the seventh round (190th overall) as a defensive end. He didn't hit his stride, however, until he made the unusual move of switching to offensive tackle in 1990. He was subsequently signed as a free agent by the San Diego Chargers, where he played six seasons.

Swayne is no stranger to Super Bowls. This year's game was his fourth; his teams have won all but one of those. He started at left tackle for San Diego against San Francisco in Super Bowl XXIX and, after signing with Denver in 1997, tasted victory in Super Bowls XXXII



Photograph, top, by Bill Ballenberg; bottom, courtesy of Billet family; illustration by Michael Witte