



C O V E R S T O R Y

LEAP OF FAITH

WHAT BRIAN LEONARD KNEW THAT EVERYONE ELSE IS JUST FINDING OUT

Call him Nostradamus. Call him Kreskin.

There's no other way to explain it. Brian Leonard knew something about the football team at the State University that not many others did. How else do you explain why Leonard - a sure fire first-day NFL draft pick - would come back for his senior season?

If you ask Leonard, he felt Rutgers had some unfinished business to complete, and he wanted to be a part of it.

"I felt throughout my college career that I proved that I can play at the next level," Leonard said in January. "But there's one thing I haven't accomplished, and that's taking Rutgers to a BCS game and winning a championship."

At the time, Rutgers was just off its first trip to a bowl game in three decades, so fans could chalk up Leonard's exuberance to riding the high of leading the Scarlet Knights to their first winning season since he was 13 years old.

It's fine to talk about BIG EAST Championships and BCS bowl berths in January, but in November? In past seasons, talk of BCS games and national championships would have drawn skepticism around the country. In 2006, however, the Scarlet Knights remain one of the few unbeaten teams in the country and Leonard's comments serve as great foreshadowing for this breakout season.

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"I just knew we had the leadership now and had the athletes in place and we had the confidence to get things done this season," Leonard explained. "This group had never gone to a bowl game before, so we didn't know what to expect when we got there. We didn't know how to finish tough games. Last year, we started to realize how to get to the places this program wanted to be.

"After losing to Arizona State, I knew my time here wasn't finished. Coming here, my plan was to change this program around and make history, which we did last season. But my main goal was to take this team to a bowl game and win it."

The preparation for this season started just after the turn of the calendar year. Leonard's decision to return made him the face of Rutgers Football during the off-season. His likeness was plastered on billboards and buses on every major roadway in the state. He was touted as a Heisman Trophy Candidate on the cover of the yearbook. He has his own website where fans can follow his career and stay updated on his progress climbing the Rutgers record books. His signature maneuver - the Leonard Leap - has become legendary around campus. But Leonard always remained beyond humble, almost embarrassed, when people shined the spotlight on him.

"It's good to get the Rutgers name out there," said Leonard. "I didn't really like all the attention on me with the Heisman campaign, but anything to help Rutgers Football get its name out is great for the program."

Still, Leonard was the poster boy for one of the up-and-coming programs in the country - and with good reason. While commonly known for his spectacular plays filling up the highlight reels, Leonard has built his reputation in football circles on productivity. On October 29 against Connecticut, he caught three passes to become the leading receiver in school history with 195 - as a running back. He is also in the top-five in school history in rushing yards, attempts, rushing and receiving touchdowns, all-purpose yards, and is on the verge of becoming the all-time leading scorer in the more than 130 years since Rutgers started playing football.

Nationally, Leonard is second in career all-purpose touchdowns for active players. He is fourth nationally in all-purpose yards, and is the only player in the top 10 to have all his yards come from offensive sets.

Leonard has not gone unnoticed by the national media during his illustrious career. He was named both Freshman All-American and BIG EAST Freshman of the year by *College Football News* after leading the Scarlet Knights in rushing yards and receptions in 2002. His sophomore season was even better than the first, as Leonard led the BIG EAST in all-purpose yards and receptions per game. He caught a Rutgers running back-record 61 passes for 518 yards, both best in the nation for backs that season, and was named *Pro Football Weekly* First Team All-American. While Leonard was racking up yards

on the field and national recognition off, the program fell short of the elusive bowl bid in his first two seasons. Despite a program-building win over Michigan State to open the 2004 season, Rutgers managed to win just three more games the rest of the season. Leonard was the focus of every defensive scheme the Scarlet Knights faced, and despite gaining over 1,200 all-purpose yards in only 10 games, he was held to just nine touchdowns on the season, four of which came in Rutgers record-setting come from behind victory over Jay Cutler's Vanderbilt squad. The game plan for opposing defenses was simple: stop Leonard and you stop Rutgers.

Last season, things changed. Like Leonard, Ray Rice had opportunities to play at other big time college football schools and like Leonard, the New York-state native chose to travel south to join the Scarlet Knights. Despite a glut of players at the position, Rice worked his way into the starting lineup in the preseason to create a one-two punch in the backfield.

"Without Brian, I would not be having any of the success I'm having right now," Rice admitted. "Our bond is more than football. It's not just the on and off the field stuff with us. It's more about how we each approach life, and how the success you have in life, and the success we're having on the football field, coincide with one another."

Sharing the load was newfound territory for Leonard, but the "team-first" product of upstate New York [his parents recently moved from Gouverneur to Hailesboro] was more than happy to share the carries, and the focus. Despite being listed as a fullback, Leonard was anything but a traditional lead blocker during his first two seasons - often lining up in one-back sets and as the tailback in two-back formations - but as the 2005 season progressed, he found himself opening more holes for Rice, rather than running through them himself.

"I'm perfectly happy opening holes for Ray to run through. It feels just as good blocking for Ray as it would gaining the yards myself," said Leonard. "The fact that Ray is such a

good kid makes it so much easier. He'll be the first one to give me, the offensive line, and everyone but himself credit."

Leonard also didn't mind sharing the touches because it led to something more important - victories. The offense was transformed into one of the top units in the nation and helped lead Rutgers to a 7-4 regular season record and a third-place finish in the BIG EAST Conference, winning more conference games last season than the Scarlet Knights had in Leonard's three previous seasons combined. Most importantly, Rutgers was rewarded with a trip to the Insight Bowl, the school's first bowl berth since eight years prior to Leonard's own birth.



Leonard, who is in the top ten in school history in nearly every offensive category, was recently named National Scholar Athlete by the National Football Foundation.

COVER STORY: BRIAN LEONARD

Though he took a back seat to Rice in rushing, Leonard still gained over 1,300 all-purpose yards and scored 17 touchdowns, again earning First Team All-America honors by *Pro Football Weekly*.

Coming into the 2006 campaign with much fanfare, people began to question whether all the attention was starting to get to Leonard. People seemed to watch his every step during preseason camp. A dropped pass or fumbled exchange would be notebook-worthy material, with conspiracy theorists wondering if Leonard had lost his trademark focus. It would have been easy to get distracted by all the attention, too. Walking in Times Square, millions of people per day could see Leonard leaping defenders and barreling would-be tacklers on the 1,300 square foot Panasonic Astrovision. His number 23 jersey sold out of websites and shops around campus in mere minutes leading up to the start of the season.

With all the attention on Leonard, the opening game against North Carolina featured a continuation of the menu the Scarlet Knights began using at the end of last season - a large helping of Rice. The sophomore rushed for 201 yards and three touchdowns against the Tar Heels, while Leonard had just 45 all-purpose yards on 10 touches. The result? A 21-16 road win, and Leonard was happy.

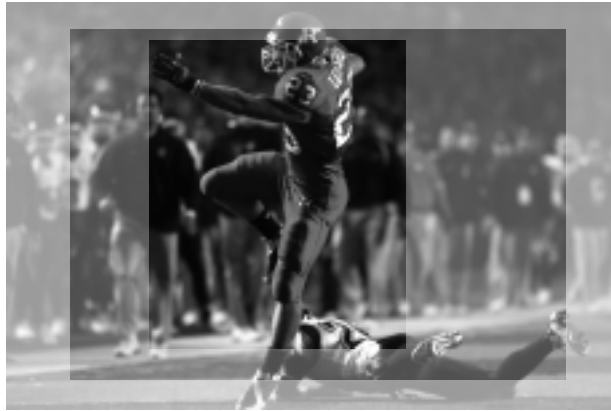
Rutgers faced Illinois in its home opener, and Rice dazzled again with 108 yards and a touchdown. Leonard had 52 all-purpose yards, and while he led the team in receptions with five, he was fourth on the team in rushing on the day. The result? A 33-0 win, and Leonard was happy.

Ohio came to town in week three and Leonard had just 19 yards on the ground, while again leading the team in receptions with four grabs for 64 yards. Rice rushed for 190 yards and two touchdowns, and started to garner some of the same Heisman buzz that Leonard was given in the preseason. The result? A 24-7 win, the first 3-0 start for RU since 1981, and Leonard was happy.

In fact, Leonard has moderate stats - by his standards - in all eight games this season, but the fullback could not be happier. He is the lead blocker for one of the top running backs in the nation, and most importantly, his team keeps winning. Following the victory over Connecticut, Rutgers is 8-0 for the first time since 1976, and has eight wins for the first time since 1979 when, coincidentally, head coach Greg Schiano was 13 years old.

"We look at it like every step this team takes is the most important in the history of the football program. Last year, getting to the bowl game was the most important step for us," said Leonard. "This year, each game, each challenge we face, is the most important step. Last week, Connecticut was the most important game for this program. This week, Louisville is the most important. After that, we hope to have more games that are the most important."

Leonard is the type of student-athlete Schiano wants everyone on his team to emulate. He's obviously gifted athletically, but Leonard also has an unparalleled work ethic, both on the field, and in the classroom. He was recently honored as one of eight Division I-A players to be named National Scholar-Athlete by the National Football Foundation and College Hall of Fame, following in the path of former Scarlet Knight Nate Jones. He is a finalist for the Draddy Trophy, an award nicknamed the "academic Heisman." A captain of the 2006 team, this squad has taken on the identity of Leonard and fellow leaders Shawn Tucker, Ramel Meekins and Eric Foster. This year's team is unselfish, disciplined and focused, just like Coach Schiano wants them to be.



"It's a blessing to have guys in the program I can put up to my sons as role models," Schiano said after hearing the news this past winter that Leonard was staying at Rutgers. "It will not be an unusual thing in this program, either."

There is no question that Brian Leonard will be inducted into the Rutgers Hall of Fame as soon as he is eligible. He's undoubtedly one of the best players in school history, and his legacy will live on well beyond his five seasons "On the Banks". He is the personification of what it means to be a Scarlet Knight. He helped change the culture of losing at Rutgers. He made a choice to attend Rutgers when playing for the State

University wasn't en vogue. He stayed at Rutgers after watching from the sidelines as RU won just one game his freshman year. He put this team - this state - on his back and made people like Rice and fellow backfield mates Kordell Young and Jack Corcoran take notice of Rutgers. While following his older brother Nate's footsteps, Leonard came to Rutgers in part because he didn't want to be just another player in a long line of great players at an established program. He wanted to help build something. He saw something in Rutgers most didn't see.

Four years later, when he could have taken millions of dollars and "leaped" to the NFL, he still saw something at Rutgers most didn't see.

"I see Rutgers as a powerhouse in the future, and I want to be a part of it."

At 8-0, this Rutgers team has a chance to do something none has ever done before. A humble man, Leonard would never dare say, 'I told you so.'

But he has every right to be thinking it.



"For a guy like Brian Leonard, who was expected to be a Heisman candidate, to accept what has become a secondary role to Ray Rice is a great credit to him as both a person and a football player."

- ESPN announcer Gary Thorne during Rutgers' victory over Connecticut.