

# 'I JUST WANT TO PLAY'

From Neal Smith to Matt McGloin, walk-ons have been a big part of the Nittany Lions' football tradition. But no one's ever had more desire to wear the blue and white than Penn State's 'Rudy,' Jeff Butya | **BY LOU PRATO**

**C**urt Warner's smile quickly widened at the mention of his virtually unknown Penn State teammate. "That's our Rudy," the Hall of Fame running back said in a voice that showed obvious enthusiasm mixed with affection. "He never really quit. He never gave up."

Warner's reference was to Rudy Ruettiger, who became famous after a 1993 hit movie that depicted his inspirational true story of overcoming dyslexia to walk on at Notre Dame in the 1974 and '75 seasons. Ruettiger had limited athletic ability and was just 5-foot-6, 165 pounds. But growing up in suburban Chicago as one of 14 children and attending a Catholic school, he had always dreamed of playing for Notre Dame.

At age 23, Ruettiger was finally accepted as a junior transfer student and made the Notre Dame practice squad. But he never dressed for a game until the last one in his senior year. Then, in a stereotypical Hollywood ending

that came true, Ruettiger went in for the last two plays against Georgia Tech, sacked the quarterback on the last play of the game and was carried off the field on the shoulders of his teammates as the students chanted "Rudy! Rudy! Rudy!"

Penn State's "Rudy" has a different story than Ruettiger's. It's not as dramatic, but it is no less enthralling, and, at times, it takes a couple of ironic, unbelievable twists that even the original Rudy cannot rival.

So, meet Jeff Butya. If you check out page 190 of the 2010 Penn State Football Yearbook, you'll see that Butya earned a letter on the Nittany Lions' 1981 team, which was one of the best of the Paterno era. His name follows that of one of Penn State's outstanding All-America linebackers, Greg Buttle. That's fitting, because Buttle and Butya are two of the most unusual characters ever to don a Penn State uniform.

Butya – it's pronounced BUHT-ya – was on the Lions' 1980 and '81 teams

and is listed in the Penn State media guides for both years as a fullback, with no number assigned in 1980 but with No. 30 for 1981. Unlike Rudy Ruettiger, he didn't just dress for one game and get into two plays at the end of his senior season. Butya dressed for several games over the two seasons, home and away, including two Fiesta Bowls, and was on the kickoff coverage team for the opening game of the 1980 and 1981 seasons. He even carried the ball once.

Butya's on-field debut in 1980 will always be one of the proudest and happiest days of his life, but he has an even better memory of the 1981 opener. In both games at Beaver Stadium, Penn State overwhelmed its undermanned opponent – Colgate, 52-10, in 1980 and Cincinnati, 52-0, in 1981. Butya was thrilled when he was sent in for the last kickoff against Colgate. "I couldn't believe I was on kickoff coverage," he said, "but I had worked hard in practice for more than a year. I think the kickoff went into the end zone, but

I was just happy to be on the field." The next season, he was even more exhilarated when told he would be on the kickoff team for the entire Cincinnati game and would be one of the players to break up the opponent's blocking wedge. In the first half, all five kickoffs went into the end zone. But on one of the second-half kickoffs, he slammed into the wedge. "I went straight down and broke it up," Butya said. After a pause, he smiled and said, "Actually, the wedge hit me, and I got to see Beaver Stadium from my back. It's a great view."

Butya also was on the sideline for one of Penn State's all-time greatest victories, the come-from-behind 48-14 upset of longtime archrival Pitt, then the No. 1 team in the country, in the final game of the 1981 regular season. Just dressing for the game and being on the sideline was everything he

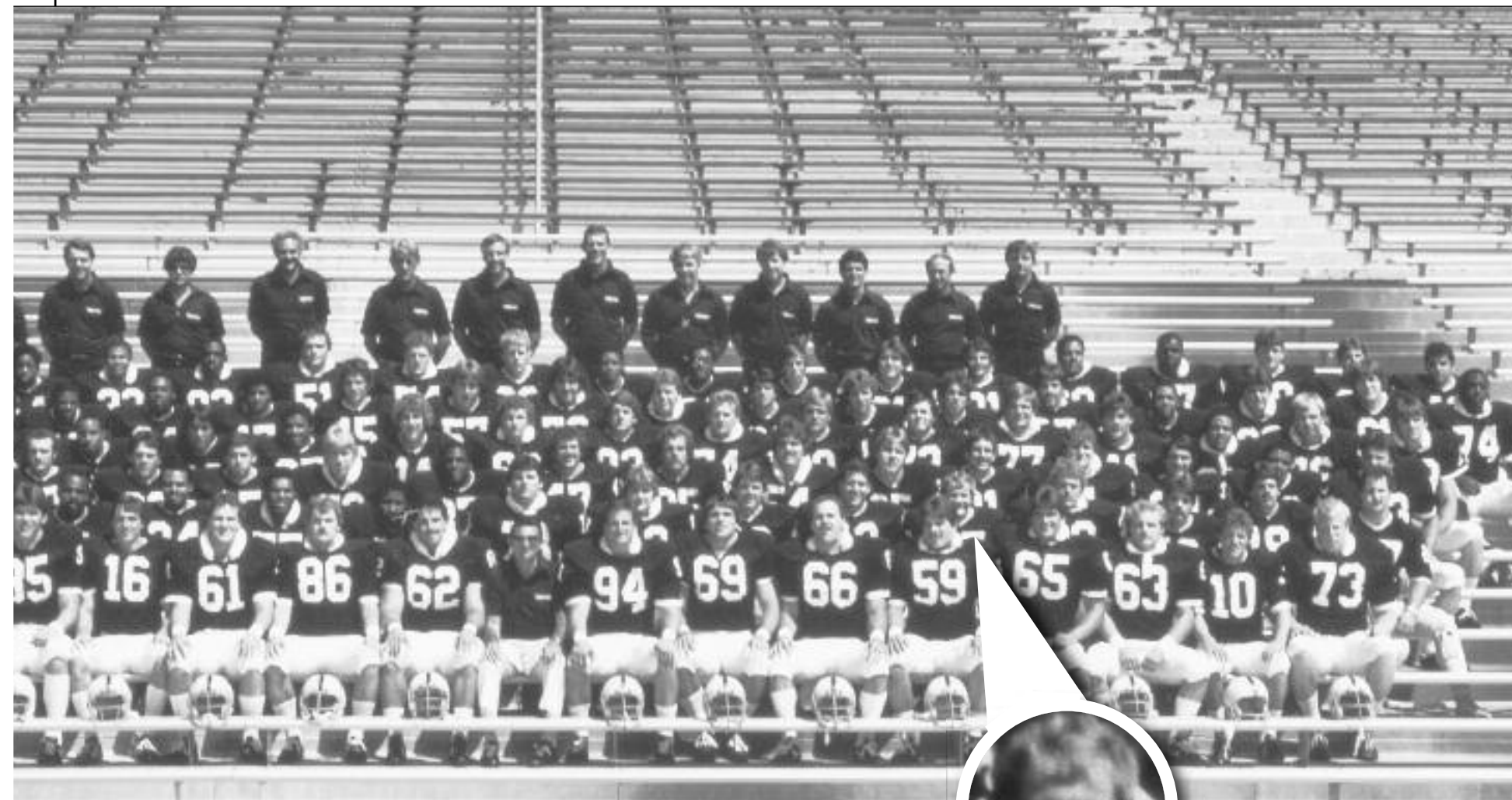


Photo courtesy of the Penn State Pattee-Paterno Library Sports Archives

dreamed about, not just because of the significance and outcome of the game, but because many family and friends from his hometown of Robinson Township and Montour High School were in the crowd that day.

"My mom and dad and brother and tons of friends were there," Butya said with pride. "It was one of the greatest days of my life."

Understand the high school football environment in the area where he grew up near the Greater Pittsburgh Airport and you understand why Butya had such a great desire to play for Penn State, rather than Pitt or any other team. Almost from the time he could walk, Butya was rooting for Montour High in the tough and competitive Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League. Coach Bob Phillips was a hometown hero, and so were many of his players while Butya was

in grade school. By the time Butya entered Montour, Phillips was an assistant coach for Joe Paterno at Penn State, and three Montour players had become standouts for the Nittany Lions' undefeated teams: All-America tight end Ted Kwalick in 1968, quarterback Chuck Burkhart in 1968 and 1969 and All-America quarterback John Hufnagel in 1973.

"They were my idols," Butya recalled. "I'd walk through the woods with my parents and our neighbors and walk up the hill to the games. Then, when they went to Penn State, we'd watch the 'Penn State Football Story' on Sunday afternoons and all the games whenever they were on television. I've always loved Penn State."

Butya wanted to follow his football heroes, first playing for Montour High and then for Penn State. But as was the case with Notre Dame's Rudy,

Butya's heart and aspirations did not match his athletic talents or physical attributes. He was 5-6, 160 pounds, short, stocky and slow, and he stayed that way from high school through college. Still, he made the Montour team as a wide receiver and for four years played exclusively on special teams. "I was never very athletic," Butya admitted. "I always had to be in the best possible shape just to compete with the athletes."

Butya did better in the classroom, and he was accepted at Penn State as long as he was willing to start at the school's small Beaver campus, 20 miles from his home. Now, here is

## HEART OF A LION

After persuading Ganter to let him suit up for the team, Butya played fullback on the 1980 and '81 squads. Pictured above is the '81 team, with Butya in the second row.

where Butya's tale spins into the realm of coincidence and destiny straight from Penn State's mythology.

Beaver didn't have a football team, but in the fall of 1977, Butya decided to try out for the baseball team, even though he had not played baseball at Montour. "I started every game in the outfield that fall and for the next two seasons," he said. The baseball coach, Eldon Price, was also the basketball coach, as well as the athletic director and coach of several other sports. One of his basketball players had been a pretty good player at nearby Monaca High School, and he, too, wanted to eventually play on the varsity team at Penn

State. Butya soon became friends with the basketball player from Monaca, Ed DeChellis. Thirty years later, DeChellis would be the head basketball coach at Penn State and Price would be the director of basketball operations for DeChellis. But this was more than a "small world" happenstance.

For the next 18 months, Butya told DeChellis and everyone else he met how he was going to play football for Penn State.

In the early spring of 1979, Butya wrote a letter to Bob Phillips at Penn State, asking if he could try out for the football team as a wide receiver. Three weeks later, Phillips replied with a friendly letter stating that Penn State liked its wide receivers to run a 40-yard dash in 4.5 to 4.7 seconds. That was not good news. Butya's best time was 5.0.

"I told myself I still had to find a way to get to Penn State," Butya recalled. "So I was talking to Eddie about this, and he said, 'I know the way up to the main campus.' I said, 'Cool, let's take a trip up someday.' So on a Tuesday afternoon, Eddie and I and one of my baseball teammates, Shawn Callahan, drove up to Penn State. I remember we listened to Tom Petty all the way. That was one of Eddie's favorite bands. We had our suits on and we were all stary-eyed. Eddie was just going up to visit friends, but I was all excited that I was going to get to talk to somebody about walking on at Penn State."

DeChellis remembers the trip because Butya was unforgettable. "Every one thought he was crazy when he said he was going to walk on at Penn State," DeChellis recalled recently. "I didn't think he was crazy. Booty was a very, very competitive person and a tough guy, the type you wanted to have on your team because he was so nasty, and a dirty player, really. He was as tall as he was wide and very physical. He'd take the charges in the [basketball] pickup games or dive on the floor, knocking you over. He had this dream and he was a persistent guy, and he was going to camp out and do whatever he could to get his shots. I told the guys he'll find a way to walk on."

Butya went directly to Rec Hall



Photo courtesy of the Penn State Pattee-Paterno Library Sports Archives

**THE RIGHT STAFF** Before becoming a Penn State assistant, Bob Phillips, top right, coached at Montour High. Shown here with the rest of the staff in 1969, Phillips was an early inspiration to Butya.

without DeChellis or Callahan. When he walked into the football office, the first things he saw were John Cappelletti's 1973 Heisman Trophy and the three Orange Bowl trophies from 1968, 1969 and 1973. "I was in awe, a kid from a small town, walking into that office for the first time, and it's really beautiful, and seeing those trophies, you're just in awe," Butya said, sounding as excited today as he was back then. But his enthusiasm quickly turned to disappointment when he found out that none of the coaches were there. Then came another of those little Penn State quirks of fate. The first person he actually met and talked to was someone who had once been a football walk-on himself, Tim Curley, then Paterno's administrative assistant, who has been the school's athletic director since 1995.

"Tim came out and said, 'Hi, I see you know Coach Bob and went to the same high school [where he coached],' " Butya said. "Tim handed me the workout sheet of paper from [strength coach] Dan Riley. It was just a little sheet of paper, but I thought it was

gold, that I'm going to get a chance to do this. Tim said, 'When you get up to the main campus, we have these fall tryouts and you can try out and make it as a walk-on like that.' "

Curley still remembers meeting Butya that day. "He was small in stature, and I really wasn't sure he would make the team," he recalled. "As he tried out and went through the process, he had so much passion and determination and just so much excitement about being a part of the program that he eventually made the team and was just one of the best walk-on student-athletes we've had in the program."

Butya spent the rest of the spring and summer following the workout instructions on Riley's sheet of paper. In the fall, he started classes on the main campus, and when the football team held open tryouts before the first game in mid-September, Butya was there. "I ran a slow 40 time and was cut," he said. But that just made him more determined.

Throughout the fall of 1979, Butya would go watch the team practice,

three or four times a week. Even though practices were closed with plastic covering the fence, Butya could stand in the parking lot and catch glimpses of the team working out. He would stay until after the players walked by him to the locker room. "I'd see Matt Millen and Bruce Clark and Todd Blackledge and I was just in awe," Butya continued, "and I said to myself, 'I'm going to do this someday. I'm going to do this someday.' And you see the coaches walking by, too. They were all so friendly and all so nice. And you do this over and over again and you start meeting people, like Tim Shope, the equipment manager, and John Fee, Tim's assistant, and they get to know you and you become friends."

Meanwhile, Butya was also working out in the exercise facility at the Intramural Building, which was not just limited to athletes but was open to all students, who were restricted to a back area, along with the aspiring walk-ons. That continued through the winter as Butya geared up for another attempt to try out for the football team in the spring. He still couldn't believe he was

in the same exercise room with the players, and he was now starting to make friends with some of them, especially the other walk-ons.

"One thing about those workouts," Butya said, "you're either going to be strong or fast. Once again, I'm slow. I run a 5.0 40. So I get cut again. This was the last day before spring practice. I asked the grad assistant who was in charge of the walk-ons, Bob Petchel, if there is any way I can get on the team. He said, 'Go talk to Coach Bob and Fran Ganter. They're right over there. They're going to be walking over to the football office.' "

The running tests were held in the old Greenberg complex where the Lasch Football Building is today, and the football offices were still across campus in Rec Hall.

"I caught up to them and introduced myself," Butya said. "This was the first time I had ever talked to Coach Bob or Frannie. From Greenberg all the way to West Halls, I begged them to give me a chance. I said, 'I know I can do this. I'll do anything you want. I just want to play. It's been my dream. I know I can do this.' Then, right when we get to the West Halls, Frannie turned around and said, 'OK, you convinced me. Go tell Shope to give you a physical, give you a uniform and we'll see you at practice tomorrow.' "

"I couldn't believe it. I ran back to my dorm. I called my parents. I was so happy. I was just ecstatic that I got a chance to do this. I walked into the locker room the next day and Shope couldn't believe that I got it. He and Fee and some of the players I got to know in the winter workouts, like Curt Warner, Blackledge, Walker Lee Ashley and Mark Battaglia, they were so happy for me. And I got that uniform and walked into the locker room and I was in awe, I mean I am still a fan, too, and then I see Joe walk in and all of a sudden I was part of it. I was like a little kid at Christmas."

Ganter doesn't remember the walk that day from Greenberg to West Halls, but he vividly recalls Butya "pleading his case."

"Jeff was special," Ganter said. "He was absolutely heartbroken when he didn't make it the second time, but he was different than other walk-ons. He was so persistent. And he just loved Penn State. He's the type of guy you want to help."

Because of his 5-foot-6, 162-pound frame that had not changed since high school, Butya was made a fullback, but he often played tailback, too. He found himself sitting in the same meeting room with Warner, Booker Moore, Mike Meade and the other running backs reviewing the playbook and going through the same practice drills, even carrying the ball on the sixth or seventh repetition.

"It was unbelievable," he said. "I didn't play much in high school, and here I am running the same plays as Warner, Moore and Meade. You're right in there with all them, doing the same thing they're doing. You have these scrimmages throughout the spring in Beaver Stadium. And you're there and you say, 'Wait a second. This isn't really happening.' It was just awesome. Of course I was getting clobbered in all the scrimmages, but no matter how hard I got hit I would always get up smiling. I was so happy just to be there. Practice was wonderful."

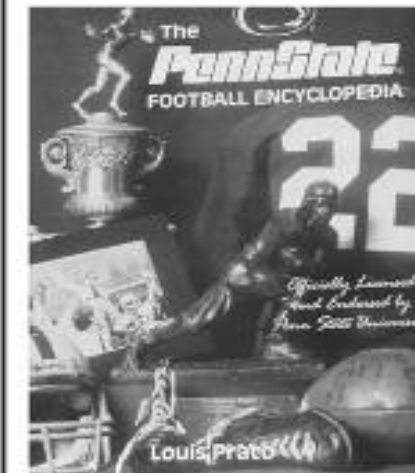
"But you know what the best thing was about spring practice? The training table. Ice cream from the Creamery. Prime rib. The salads. Steak two days a week. The walk-ons get to eat it! I put on 10 pounds by the end of the spring. That was something."

The only thing better was the Blue-White Game. There were about 20,000 in the stadium, including Butya's parents. "And I actually got to play in the game," he said. "I carried the ball near the end. I didn't know if I was going to make [the team] yet, but my mom and dad were in the stands cheering for me, right there in Beaver Stadium. I just felt so good. You can't believe what it was like."

The dream could have ended there as it did for most of the other walk-ons. They were not invited back for fall practice when the letters went out a few weeks later, but Butya was. "I still have that letter," he said, "and I remember staring at that signature at the bottom. It simply said, 'Best Wishes, Joe.' I thought, wow."

*In part two, Jeff Butya's tenacity and perseverance to play for Penn State are tested more than the original Rudy's were at Notre Dame, as he endures a rugged weekly practice session that becomes known to the 1981 Nittany Lion team as "Bloody Tuesday."*

# The Penn State Football Encyclopedia



## A Must For The Ultimate Penn State Football Fan...

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