

'I JUST WANT TO PLAY'

Jeff Butya fulfilled a lifelong dream by earning a spot on the Penn State football team in 1980. But as he soon discovered, making the team was only the first of many challenges | **BY LOU PRATO**

Despite his size, limited athletic ability and inexperience in high school, Jeff Butya of Montour High School won a spot on Penn State's 1980 team as a walk-on. Butya's story is similar to the inspirational tale of the most famous walk-on in college football, Notre Dame's Rudy Ruettiger. Part one of this series showed how Butya dreamed of playing football for Penn State and what he did to be accepted as a walk-on. Part two describes what happened once he made the roster and the determination and perseverance he showed to get on the field and achieve his dream.

When Jeff Butya reported to Penn State for preseason practice in 1980, his roommate wasn't any third- or fourth-stringer but starting guard Mike Munchak, who would one day be inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Was this just another stroke of luck or part of Butya's destiny in eventually becoming Penn State's Rudy?

On the first day of practice, as the players were waiting at 7 a.m. to take the mandatory running tests, there was another moment that seemed preordained by the mythic Penn State football gods. In a short scene often repeated over the decades by Joe Pater-

no with his players, the head coach yelled at Butya because he had violated a cardinal Paterno rule.

"We were sitting in the locker room and I'm up front and wearing an Oakland A's baseball cap," Butya recalled. "Joe came walking through the room, and he sees me. Then, in his high-pitched, squeaky voice, Paterno yelled, 'Hey, Butya. Get that hat off. No hats on in the house.' I thought, 'Oh my god, I'm in the doghouse.' The other guys were all laughing." They weren't just laughing at Butya but at themselves, too, for many of them had already been reprimanded by Paterno for the same offense. Welcome to the club, walk-on!

"The more I thought about it, I was even happy it happened because he knew my name," Butya added. "I couldn't believe that. He knew my name."

Butya remembers immediately going out and winning the first running test of fall practice, a test in which players were required to run two half-miles within a specified time limit. It was the test made famous the year before when Matt Millen refused to do it and was stripped of his captaincy. "I was in great shape," Butya said. The next day, when he had to run the 40-yard sprint 10 times back and forth, Butya passed the test but could barely keep up with some of the linemen, struggling to achieve a 5.5.

Butya went through the rugged preseason practices sessions – "One of the best times of my life," he called the experience – and when Penn State opened the season against Colgate on Sept. 6, 1980, Jeff Butya achieved his dream.

"You can't imagine what it's like when you're getting dressed in that locker room, when everyone's getting serious for game day," he said, still marveling at the experience. "There's no talking, and you're listening to the [soft] music and everyone's serious. And then you run out of that tunnel and see the fans and you hear all that cheering. It is unbelievable."

And when Butya went onto the field late in the game as part of the kickoff

coverage unit, he was thrilled. But it would be the last time he would play that season. He dressed for two more home games, against Syracuse on Homecoming and Pitt in the traditional regular-season finale. He also went to Morgantown for the West Virginia game because Paterno's policy was to take walk-ons from the Pittsburgh area to games at West Virginia and Pitt.

Butya's dream year climaxed when he was on the traveling squad for the Fiesta Bowl game against Ohio State on Dec. 26. He was disappointed he didn't get on the field, but with 4:40 left in the game and Penn State winning, 31-7, NBC showed about 10 seconds of the happy Penn State bench. At the forefront of a bunch of celebrating players – including such starters as Walker Lee Ashley, Mike Meade and Sean Farrell – was Butya, the nonplaying walk-on, with a big smile on his face mugging for the camera with his forefinger up in the air.

Despite how happy he had been throughout the 1980 season, Butya was downhearted he had not been on the field more, and it looked like his dream of playing for Penn State had come to an end. After two years at the Beaver campus and two years at University Park, the coaches and his football teammates expected that Butya, a senior, would be graduating that spring. However, like a sly card shark in a high-stakes poker game, Butya had a trick up his sleeve – some-



Photo courtesy of Jeff Butya

PART OF THE TEAM Butya, 30, relished his time with the Lions and was thrilled to practice alongside scholarship players like Kirk Bowman (57), Greg Gattuso (70), Gregg Garrity (9) and Vyto Kab (85). Fans may also recall No. 22 from the opposing team, a guy by the name of Doug Flutie.

thing he had planned since his freshman year at Beaver.

"I had saved one freshman course, Marketing 122, so they couldn't force me to graduate because it was a core requirement for my business degree," Butya, an accounting major, said with a devilish laugh. "I wanted to save that course in case I made the team and could come back and play another season."

The coaches didn't have to allow Butya back on the team, but it was an easy decision. "He loved being out there and being part of it so much and he didn't want it to end," assistant coach Fran Ganter said. "He was just a likeable kid, the type of guy you wanted to have on your team."

Butya was overjoyed to be back with the team. "It was the same thing all

over again," he said. "I had all those practices, got to play in the spring game, ate at the training table in the spring and fall preseason, and played in more games. I was really part of it, now. This was my second time around. I knew what to expect, what was going on. It's really fun now."

Here is where Butya's interpretation of "fun" differs vastly from that of his teammates, coaches and Notre Dame's Rudy. It can be summed up in what became known in 1980 and 1981 as Butya's "Bloody Tuesday."

"Every Tuesday was my game day," Butya explained with a twinkle in his eye. "For three hours, I'd be over there on the defensive field with the [offensive] scout team. I spent more time with the defensive coaches because the offense would be preparing

on their side [of the field]. We would go against the first-team defense. When you get into the season, you get into a groove. And every week, no matter who we played – Colgate, Cincinnati, Boston College, Pitt, Maryland – I would always be the running back on those teams. I was Joe Morris [of Syracuse]. I was Mike Rozier [of Nebraska]. I was Marcus Allen [of USC]. I would be those running backs in running those plays preparing the defense for the upcoming week."

Ganter said it is common for defensive starters to ask the scout team to go easy. "The guys have a tendency to try and intimidate the scout team, telling them, 'Don't go so hard' and 'Don't make me look bad,'" Ganter said. "Booty never would let up like most guys. He would go all out. He

kept churning his legs, kept trying to get that extra yard. He drove them crazy. They were always mad at him and would flip him around like a top. It was like the old WWF. They were on the other side of the field [from where the offense was]. But in between a play, we'd gaze over and you'd see Booty flying through the air like a top."

One day at the training table, Penn State's starting tailback Curt Warner asked Butya why he took all that punishment. "I don't mean to sound cynical but typically, you really don't pay much attention to the guys on the foreign team," Warner recalled recently. "They're in a different world. But Jeff was a running back, and I could relate to him. And then I used to watch him, and that defense was not very nice to him."

"So we're sitting around the table with some others at the cafeteria, and I don't remember whether it was 1980 or 1981, but Jeff's got a Band-Aid on his chin and he just looks beat. I didn't know him well at the time but I'm looking at him and thinking, 'We're all out here paying our dues, and this guy is paying to go to school, too.' I said to him, 'Why are you out here? If I was in your shoes, I wouldn't be out here doing this.' And he says, 'Curt, because I love Penn State football.' I said, 'Butya, you're a better man than I am.' From that time on, I paid more attention to what he was doing and respected him for that. He never quit. He never let up. And you could depend on him."

Butya laughs as he remembers those two years of practice. Linebacker Chet Parlavecchio, one of the most aggressive and fiery players of the Paterno era and co-captain of the 1981 team, was the ringleader of the gang that hammered Butya Tuesday after Tuesday and other days whenever they could.

"Every time he carried the ball, I would hit him, whether it was late, early or just near the ball," Parlavecchio recalled as he laughed about it, too. "Sometimes it was so obviously late or dirty or whatever. I did that for two years."

"Chet always wanted to clobber me," Butya laughed. "I drove him nuts. He is a good guy but he could hit me. And Walker Lee Ashley, Rich D'Amico and Leo Wisniewski, too. They used to pound me away. But the thing is, I would always get up smiling. I enjoyed it. I was like a Weeble [toy]. You remember in jingle 'Weebles wobble but they don't fall down'? I would never get knocked out. They could never put me out, no matter what. My back was like a golf course with all the divots in it, but I never missed a day of practice, ever."

It wasn't that Parlavecchio was a cruel, sadistic madman who simply disliked walk-ons. He had a grudge against this particular walk-on. In the pre-season of 1980, Parlavecchio quit the team when he wasn't getting enough playing time, but after a few days he realized how dumb and irrational he had been. He apologized to



Photo courtesy of Tim King

PENN STATE PROUD Butya, center, is co-owner of the All-Star Sports Bar & Grille in Robinson Township, Pa. His establishment is a hub of activity for area alums, including Tim King, left, president of the Greater Pittsburgh Alumni Chapter, and Laura Kunig, the chapter's treasurer.

Paterno, but the coach said the team would have to vote on allowing him to return. The team held a meeting in the locker room without Parlavecchio, and when it was over he asked D'Amico how the vote went.

"Rich said everyone voted for me to return except that guy over there, and he pointed to Jeff Butya," Parlavecchio recalled. "I didn't know Jeff Butya from anyone else. Rich said he voiced some sort of opinion about if I was a walk-on nobody would care and there would be no vote. Being a young kid, I was aggravated. I was happy to be back but it stayed in the back of my mind. From that day on for over two years, I made him wish he had voted the other way.

"I even had guys like Leo Wisniewski and Sean Farrell and Mike Munchak tell me 'to leave it alone, forget it,

enough is enough,' and I never would answer," said Parlavecchio, who outweighed Butya by 60 pounds and was six inches taller. "But it just went on and on and on. And he wouldn't say anything. He would just get up. He would just continue working hard.

"One day in my senior year [of 1981], in one of the last practices I ever had as a Penn State football player, we were in the old Greenberg, getting ready for Southern Cal [in the Fiesta Bowl]. Jeff just went to the flat and someone threw him the ball and I rifled him. Bam! And he got up and goes, 'That's it. That's it. I've had enough. I can't take it anymore. Come on you sonuvabitch.' And he had his hands up ready to fight. And I just started laughing. I looked at him and walked up and gave him the biggest hug in the world. And I said, 'I'm sorry, Jeff. I

apologize, man. It's over.' He swore and said, 'For God's sake, finally,' and everybody started laughing on the field because everybody knew deep inside what it was all about.

"We turned out to be good friends. We've seen each other or been in contact over the years and we laugh about it all the time. Jeff was really a tough kid. There were some vicious hits and he would never say anything, except sometimes he would look at me and say, 'Weebles wobble but they don't fall down.' And I would stare at him and say, 'Are you kidding me?' I'm putting him through living hell and he's telling me about Weebles. I wouldn't have put up with it. I would have waited until the guy was getting out of the shower and smashed his head with a bat. But Jeff was one of those guys who were just proud to be on the team

and wear that uniform, and he really did a great job for us. And, yeah, I'd agree, he's our Rudy."

What truly thrusts Butya's story into the legendary realm of Rudy Ruettiger is Penn State's 1981 season. Paterno has often said this team was more talented than the 1982 team that won the national championship the following year with many of the same players. It was a historic season in many ways, and Butya was an integral and inspirational part of it.

Before playing a game, the schedule was rated by the NCAA as the second-toughest in the country, including the first regular-season game ever against Alabama, the first game since 1926 against Notre Dame, and other difficult games at Miami, Nebraska and Pitt. But the Lions seemed up to the challenge, and after winning their first six games they were No. 1 in the polls.

In the opening game against Cincinnati, Butya can be clearly seen on the kickoff team in the videotape of the game. All five kickoffs in the first half were out of the end zone. In the first kickoff of the second half, Butya fights off a block at the Cincinnati 12-yard line but just misses tackling the return man who scoots to the 23. On the second kickoff of the half, Butya is nowhere in sight. "That's when I saw Beaver Stadium from my back," he said. After the Lions score their final touchdown with 2:48 left in the game, Butya takes on two blockers but still tackles the return man at the 23-yard line with a teammate joining him an instant later.

Then, on the next-to-the-last play of the game, Ganter sent in Butya to run the ball. "The play was 43-Right-ISO," Butya said with excitement, "and I gained 2 yards over right guard." That's what he remembers, but in telling and retelling stories over the years, the truth of what happens is often lost in the joy and exaggeration of our feats. As the game video showed, Butya took the handoff, ran to his left and was tackled by three Cincinnati players for a 2-yard loss. But the play never appeared in the final statistics of the game because of a 5-yard penalty against the Lions for illegal procedure.

Butya dressed for the rest of the home games but did not play against Temple, Boston College, West Virginia, Alabama and Notre Dame. He

traveled to Miami when the Lions were No. 1 and watched as his beloved team was upset by the Hurricanes, 17-14, on a rainy, windy Halloween day, and then watched in Beaver Stadium two weeks later when Bear Bryant became the winningest coach in college football with Alabama's stunning 31-16 victory. Though disappointed that he had not played since Cincinnati, he was even more hurt by those two defeats.

"That was my team and my teammates," Butya said, "and we all took it pretty hard. We knew we lost any chance for a national championship. And just thinking about what it would have been like for me to have been on a national championship team is unbelievable. Wouldn't that have been something?"

After those disheartening defeats, the 1981 team redeemed itself with that stunning 48-14 victory over then-No. 1 Pitt and later a 26-10 victory over USC in the first Fiesta Bowl played on New Year's Day. Although he was a little disappointed he did not get on the field in either game, Butya did manage to get on national television one more time at Pitt Stadium. When linebacker Matt Bradley intercepted Dan Marino with 8:46 left, a turnover that virtually clinched the victory, Butya is seen running up to Bradley on the sideline and congratulating him.

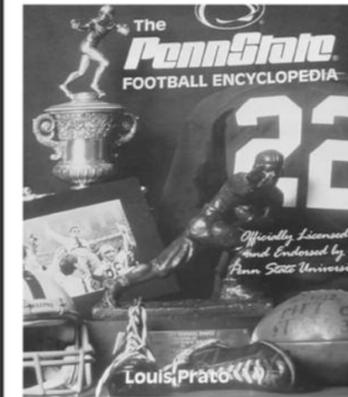
Rudy Ruettiger could only dream of all that national television exposure. Amazingly, Butya also is seen twice in the 1981 Penn State highlights video. "I was in the highlight tape near the opening, running towards a bunch of players on the field after our pre-game warmups and jumping into them," Butya said with pride. "And then after the Fiesta Bowl, when Curt [Warner] and Joe [Paterno] are getting awards, the camera pulls back and I'm shaking hands with [starting defensive back] Paul Langford."

Butya has two more distinct memories of that 1981 season.

"When we were preparing for the Fiesta Bowl, I didn't have a place to stay because I was kicked out of my dorm room, and Eddie DeChellis let me stay with him," Butya said. DeChellis remembers Butya sleeping on his apartment floor for about a month. "He'd come home at night and be up early

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