Ram Tough

Former Scarlet Knight Brian Leonard—picked in the second round of the NFL draft by the St. Louis Rams—is proving he can make the grade in the pros.

By Frank Viverito ’76

One of Rutgers’ most passionate football fans lives in a place better known for baseball, beer, and an arch than for diners and a turmpkinke. And with his new home being in St. Louis, and his own “busy season” taking place during the fall, this top fan couldn’t even make it to a Rutgers home game this year. Forgive him, but Brian Leonard ’97 had something important to prove out there—New Yorkers might picture the former Rutgers grid star as currently living somewhere out in the middle of a field ... and they’d be right.

A backfield, that is.

Last anyone has forgotten, Leonard was the renowned fullback who not only was a key factor in the turnaround of Rutgers football on the field, but also who won the Draddy Trophy (college football’s “Academic Heisman”) and the ARA Sportsmanship Award, presented annually by the NCAA Division I football player who most exemplifies sportsmanship both on and off the gridiron. He earned a bachelor’s degree in labor studies he received college football All-America honors three times; and he holds Rutgers football career records in receptions (207), points scored (272), and all-purpose yards (5,561). As the St. Louis Rams’ second-round pick (52nd overall) in the 2007 NFL draft, Leonard was delighted to be chosen by a team that would allow him primarily as a running back. And it didn’t take him too long to prove his value to his new team in that regard. He scampered for 102 yards on 18 carries in just his second start in the NFL in week five, after the Rams’ first-string superstar running back Steven Jackson went down with an injury two games prior. The so-called “Leonard Leap” also made its midwestern debut in that game as Leonard hurdled over a would-be Arizona Cardinals tackle, and the NFL rookie also caught five passes good for an additional 33 yards.

Having met Leonard for the first time very informally, almost coincidentally, after a long day of practice in last August training-camp weather, he was cool, calm, well spoken, friendly, and focused. He remained pleasant, greeted a fellow Rutgers alumnus and native New Yorker, and was glad to hear about the virtues of St. Louis from a transplant who had arrived 25 years before—and stayed. Subsequently speaking about his early transition to life in the Midwest, Leonard says that the region has a little more of a “country feel to it,” but he had “really adapted to it and had begun to enjoy it.”

When asked about the transition to the NFL from the college ranks, Leonard had only wonderful things to say about Scarlet Knights Head Coach Greg Schiano. “I learned a lot from Coach Schiano and felt prepared coming from Rutgers. Additionally, he notes, “The playbook is more complicated in the NFL and you have a relatively short time to learn it, but there’s definitely a great determination to win at both levels and at both places.”

As far as adjusting to life in St. Louis and to playing in the NFL, Leonard sees differences in the accelerated speed of the pro game and the fact that the athletes are playing primarily for a salary as opposed to college, where they compete more for pride. “And so many NFL players have wives, kids, and full lives away from the team that it’s hard not to miss the closeness and camaraderie of the squad at Rutgers,” he adds.

So far in St. Louis, he’s done some touristic things like going to the region’s world-class zoo and science center—he’s planning to participate in civic activities with the St. Louis Sports Commission—and he’s had some rewarding moments doing charity and community service work, most notably with former Rams MVP quarterback Kurt Warner on a punt, pass, and kick competition for Special Olympics kids.

Leonard sees NFL football as a job and as an all-consuming one at that, and he takes great pride knowing that he was able to prove early on in the season that he belongs in the league and can succeed there. He looks forward to helping rebuild a tradition of success with the St. Louis Rams, much as he did at Rutgers.

So be that, still, Leonard is a self-proclaimed "Jersey boy" and looks forward to returning east for several months during the off-season and to living back in New Jersey whenever his pre-playing days are done.

“My five years at Rutgers were the best five years of my life,” he says. When asked what he most wanted to tell readers back home, he says without hesitation, “I can’t believe how much of a Rutgers fan I am.”

Frank Viverito is president of the St. Louis Sports Commission, where he “lives and breathes sports each day.”