

Captain Alex Kroll and Coach John Bateman



ALEX KROLL'S SPEECH AT THE 2014 RUTGERS HALL OF FAME INDUCTION OF RU'S 1961 FOOTBALL TEAM

First, let me congratulate Courtney Turner, a perfect ten and a perfect four are hard points to make. You are the NCAA's dream of a scholar-athlete.

And to the family of Charles Garrett, what a pitcher he must have been. It is so nice that Rutgers has revived his exploits. There is no statute of limitations on honoring excellence.

And Shawn O'Hara, the consummate center. I know one when I see one. Congratulations, Shawn. Your Giants need you.

Thanks to the committee. I am proud to accept this honor on behalf of my teammates.

You made an excellent choice in the team of "61".

I can speak with a certain amount of objectivity about them. Though I am one of them I was also a latecomer to the team. I made a few stops at other football teams on the way here, and after I left. But in my mind, the word "team" has only one meaning and it's these guys out there tonight.

They brought honor to Rutgers in two ways. By what they did fifty three years ago, which was inimitable. And what they have done with their fifty three years since. And the two are linked. Let me explain how.

First of all, being perfect is hard to do and in college football, much harder than you think.

Consider: in that season of 1961, among the 200 major college football teams, only two managed to go undefeated: Rutgers and Alabama.

Since, then perfect records have been achieved precisely 66 times.

That's comes to 1.2 perfections per season, but that still doesn't capture the degree of difficulty. Those 200 major schools have each played 53 seasons since 1961, or a total of

10,600 college football seasons. That means that perfection happened six times in every 1000 seasons that were played. Six out of a thousand.

Daunting as it may seem to crack into that elite group, Rutgers in 1961 faced an even stiffer challenge than any other school.

We were cursed.

Like the Boston Red Sox and their curse of the Bambino.

In 93 years, Rutgers teams had come within one game of perfection seven times, once within a quarter of perfection, only to fall short. In 1960, we came within three points of perfection. In 1958, Bill Austin's team, came within one point, the only loss being to an opponent that wasn't even on the schedule a few weeks earlier – just filler they were. Talk about a curse.

By 1961, even schools like Middle Tennessee State and Colorado Mines had notched perfect seasons. But not Rutgers. The worst indignity was that Princeton, the visiting college at the first college football game, just 16 miles down route one, had gone undefeated eleven times.

I understood the Red Sox' sin, trading the incomparable Babe Ruth to their meanest competitor. But Rutgers? What had Rutgers people done to deserve this fate?

I thought a lot about it. I knew my English professors chafed at the blundering attempt to rhyme "stood" with "flood" in the anthem, "On the Banks". But surely, this is venial sin.

However, agreeing to play Princeton, at Princeton, from 1869 to 1938, sixty-nine years, was not a venial sin. Who agreed to surrender the home field advantage for seven decades? As you know, Rutgers lost every game in that time – which makes going undefeated hard to do. Was that what brought the curse down on us? I couldn't figure it out. But fortunately, it didn't matter. No matter what and why the curse is, throughout history, the way to break it, atone for or absolve it, is always the same. Through exceptional acts of self-sacrifice, unselfishness.

Our team was loaded with unselfishness. That was our great invisible talent. These guys checked their egos at home before they left for preseason practice. One obvious example: We had two outstanding quarterbacks, Sam Mudie and Bill Speranza, who shared the position. Each would have started for every team we played. But they played the position differently and the change of pace drove opponents' nuts. No grouching, grumbling or controversy. And keep in mind, they called their own plays. They could have called their own number, at any time. But they didn't

Do you know how many passes Sam and Bill called? An average of twelve per game. Total. Since we could run over anybody, they called runs. These guys were not stat happy. They were team happy.

A half dozen of them could have been captain. Bill, Sam, Steve Simms, Pierce, others, and the result would have been the same. For each of us, it was all about the team.

However, I did make it harder on everybody. By revealing our collective vow to go undefeated. During the winter prior to the season at a big Rutgers alumni bash, I went public and assured that we would win them all. They cheered like crazy. That just ratcheted up the pressure.

And then finally, came opening day, and the curse arrived on time. Unfortunately, our bus driver did not. Either he misunderstood the game time or misjudged how long it would take to get to Princeton and we left – from right out front of here, this ancient gym—late. We got caught in the game traffic on route one. Imagine this: Fans honking at us, waving at us,

toasting us, some in convertibles, with our post game dates and their 'Chaperones', a French word meaning "A Rutgers student swilling beer behind the wheel on route one".

Locked in the traffic jam, Abe Civas, the trainer, started taping ankles on the bus. He said, "We may be late for the kickoff". How's that for adding to pre-game tension. However, we arrived with perhaps an hour to spare, hustled into our uniforms, ran full speed on to the field, cut back on warm ups and beat Princeton for the fourth time in a row.

And then, we flew. Undefeated through the next seven games.

Finally, the day meant for our crowning arrived. A cloudless, sixty five degree day, November 25th, felt more like sweet September than November. An overflow crowd roaring support for us.

And we crashed.

The curse rose.

We played like fumbling, bumbling stumbling bums. Down by 12 points with 12 minutes to play. But there was no quit in this team. With a spark from Dave Brody's kickoff return, we were fired up with what might be called huddle rage. "They are not going to take this away from us" we screamed at each other.

We ground down the field. To the ten, fourth and goal, still down twelve points. This would be the play of our lives. Bill Speranza, who had had as ragged a day as the rest of us, showed pure courage. He rolled out right and threw high to Lee Curley who leaped and stretched as high as he could, captured the ball with one great paw, and the deluge was on. We scored 25 points in the best 12 minutes of Rutgers' football ever.

Then came Glory. AP ranked us 15th in the nation, the highest finishing mark of any Rutgers team before or since.

And then? Then we all graduated—on time. No graduation rates in those days. Then? Al Twitchell, the AD, Sonny Werblin, Dick Hale all told me, independently, that the perfect season lifted the sights and the confidence all Rutgers sports teams.

Then what happened? Something strange. The head coach, John Bateman, gave an order to the team manager. He said, "Keep those guys together". And he did. Tony Oliva became the longest serving athletic manager in the history of American sports. For better than a half century Tony has been the glue that has kept us connected and kept our shared sacrifices and success vivid, relevant and even inspirational.

Mr. Glue. Please stand. The most loyal of loyal sons.

Are you going to retire now?

And then what happened?

These teammates became doctors, surgeons, lawyers, industry chiefs, ceo's, winning entrepreneurs, financial consultants, college coaches, a professional coach with two super bowl rings, the most honored coach in NJ high school history, teachers, principals, a distinguished professor of history, a lifetime social worker, an airline pilot, and one highly decorated Army General.

And along the way, these good football players became good husbands, fathers, grandfathers, public servants and citizens.

Isn't that what this game is all about?

It wasn't easy for them to accomplish all they did. It wasn't a breeze any more than that last game was.

Let me give you three examples of many: Pierce Frauenheim, a fierce cigarette smoker, lost his voice to larynx cancer at 29. He then took what he had left, an electrified growl, on the road, for the American Cancer Society, all over the country, demonstrating to high school kids the damage smoking could do to them, as it had done to him. You don't think that scared hell and scared the cigarettes out of thousands of them?

And along the way, he managed to coach 322 victories and 4 state championships at Immaculata High School, down the road. No quit Pierce Frauenheim.

Stan Cherry, a fourth string guard, spoke to the Rutgers' football team a few years ago, about how the 1961 season girded him for his military career, particularly his life after Vietnam, when he spent nearly a year in a Philadelphia hospital practically crippled, by shrapnel in his back and legs, missing four fingers in his right hand. Destined to be shipped down. Retired. But somehow Stan Cherry fought his way back onto the active rolls. You can read the accolades about General Cherry in Tom Clancy's book about "Desert Storm". No quit in Stan Cherry.

Or First Lt. Jon Paulson, who served two harrowing tours in Vietnam, and absorbed life altering damage there.

You'd never know it. He never showed it. What you saw was a sunny, upbeat smile and indomitable spirit – the same spirit he produced as a Rutgers center.

He returned from war to a business career and did invaluable work in starting "Swords to Plowshares", which has aided thousands of physically and mentally wounded vets.

No quit in any of these men.

I would ask my teammates to please stand once more.

Ladies and Gentlemen: I submit that this team is the gold standard of Rutgers athletic teams. They have done much good and they have endured much: all the slings and arrows and bruises and blows that football and life can bring.

But they are still undefeated.

A FINAL QUOTE. FROM DR. MASON GROSS, PRESIDENT OF RUTGERS, SPEAKING FROM THE RUTGERS FOOTBALL TEAMS LOCKER AT APPROXIMATELY 4.30 PM, ON NOVEMBER 25TH, 1961.

"This is the greatest game ever. This is the greatest team ever. Sixty years from now people will still be talking about them."