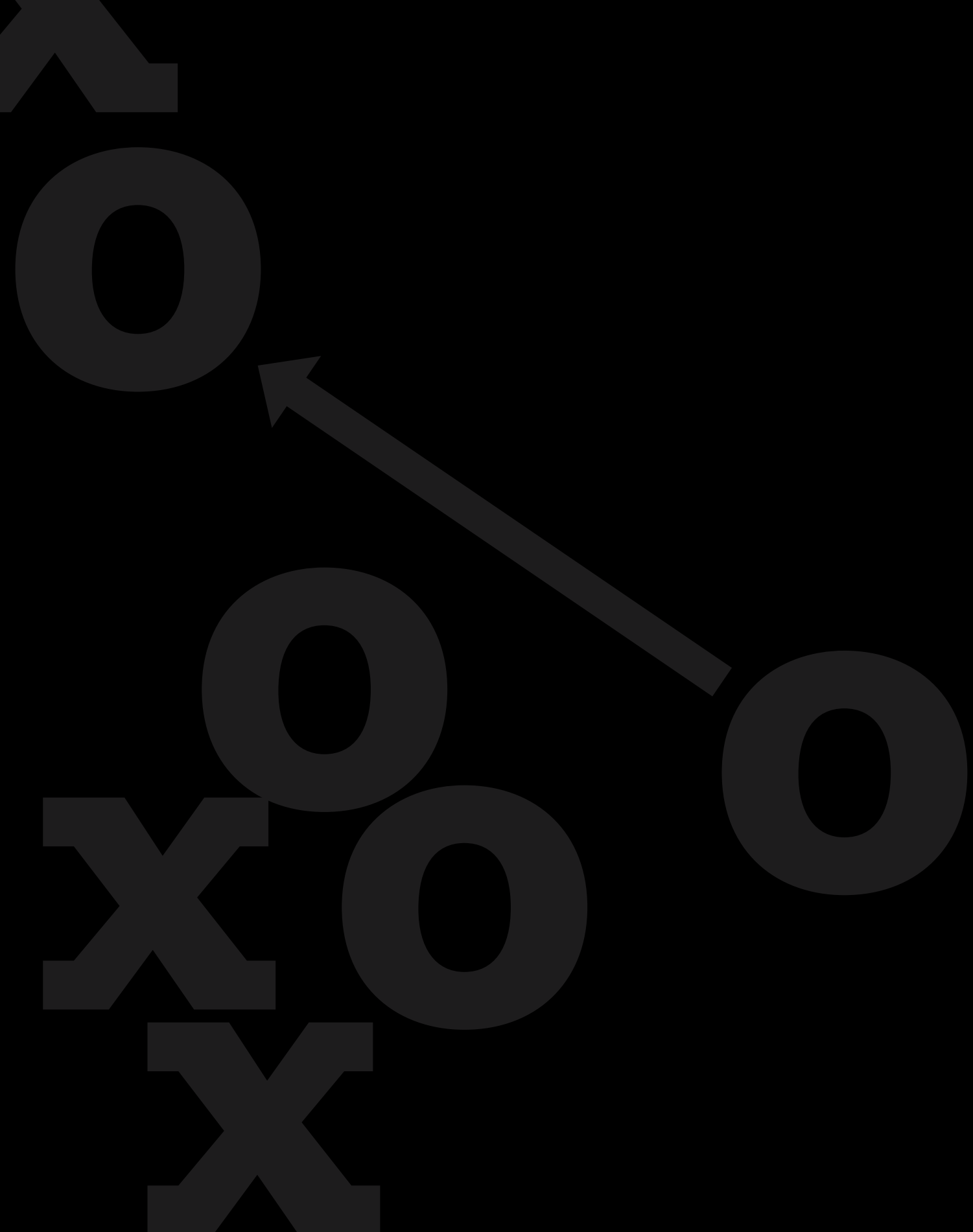




**PART FOUR 2001–2006**



## CHAPTER 13

A JERSEY GUY

2001–2004

Rutgers was a football team looking to rebuild its credibility. The Scarlet Knights had chalked up more than 550 victories over the years, but had suffered through a severe gridiron slump in recent seasons. Athletic Director Bob Mulcahy was determined to correct that downward swing. Before Mulcahy introduced Rutgers' new head coach, he gathered a group of key high-school football coaches from all over New Jersey. "For twenty-five years," Mulcahy told them, "I've kept hearing that you wanted one of your own. Now I'm giving you one, and now you guys have to deliver." Bob Mulcahy's remarks referred to the fact that New Jersey high school coaches longed for a head coach at Rutgers with Garden State roots. Rutgers was getting such a man in Greg Schiano. It was now up to New Jersey high school programs to steer their top players toward Rutgers.

Greg Schiano was from Wykoff, New Jersey, and had played high school football in the Garden State. Schiano attended Bucknell in Pennsylvania, where he was an All-Conference linebacker and team captain. When his dream of playing pro didn't materialize, he turned to coaching. In 1988 Schiano worked as an assistant coach at Ramapo High School in New Jersey. Schiano moved on to Rutgers, where he was a graduate assistant coach in 1989. In 1990 Greg Schiano was a grad assistant coach at Penn State. Schiano became the coach of defensive backs at Penn State in 1991 and remained there until 1996. He then worked as a coach in the National Football League with the Chicago Bears from 1996 to 1998. From 1999 to 2000 Greg Schiano was the defensive coordinator at the University of Miami.

Coach Schiano's journey to the banks of the old Raritan was more like a return trip home than a move to a new job. Greg Schiano was a Jersey guy. Right from the start, he stated that his mission was to attract top New Jersey football players, who had a history of leaving the state for more celebrated programs. Schiano had the gridiron charisma to achieve that mission.

Rutgers athletic director Bob Mulcahy (left) presents Greg Schiano as the new head coach of the Scarlet Knights in 2001. (Courtesy Rutgers Athletic Communications)





Above: Greg Schiano is a New Jersey native; Rutgers is the State University of New Jersey. The combination is a football match made in heaven. (Courtesy Grant Halverson/Rutgers Athletic Communications)

Below: Wide receiver Chris Baker began his Rutgers football career in 2001. (Courtesy San Francisco 49ers)



Former Rutgers tight end Tim Perneti had known Greg Schiano for many years and loudly praised his choice as the Scarlet coach: “Greg Schiano is a man of great faith and strong will. Throughout his life he has illustrated a commitment and a passion as an athlete, coach, father, and husband. He’s the type of man you want to take care of your son as they live the student-athlete experience at Rutgers.”

However, Rutgers’ first year under new head coach Schiano was not a miraculous turnaround. Building a successful big-time football program takes time. Attending Rutgers was not yet in vogue, though it would be soon enough. Schiano’s 2001 Scarlet club had some very talented football players, including captains Gary Brackett, L. J. Smith, Mike Esposito, and Shawn Seabrooks. Quarterback Ryan Cubit and running back Dennis Thomas were capable offensive weapons. Aaron Martin could catch and run. Nate Jones was a spectacular special-teams threat. Other key performers were Trohn Carswell, Alfred Peterson, Brian Duffy, Ben Martin, and Antoine Lovelace.

Coach Greg Schiano’s first Rutgers victory came on opening day of the 2001 season. Rutgers defeated the University of Buffalo 31 to 15. In the contest, Rutgers’ Shawn Seabrooks had an interception, which he returned 73 yards for a score. Losses against Miami, Virginia Tech, Connecticut, Syracuse, and Temple followed. The team’s second win was over Navy. In that game, Scarlet quarterback Ryan Cubit completed a 91-yard pass to Aaron Martin, and

followed it up later with an 80-yard pass to the same receiver.

The Scarlet Knights then stumbled against West Virginia, Pittsburgh, and Boston College. In the BC loss, Nate Jones of the Scarlet Knights picked off a pass and returned the interception 70 yards for a Rutgers touchdown. Rutgers closed out Greg Schiano’s first year as the Rutgers head coach with a defeat at the hands of California. A record of 2 wins and 9 losses sounds like a tough start, but consider that 4 of those losses were to Top 25 teams. Miami, coached by Larry Coker, went 12–0 that season and won the National Championship. Syracuse, coached by Paul Pasqualoni, ended up ranked 14th in the country. Coach Frank Beamer’s Virginia Tech team was ranked 18th in the nation. Boston College, guided by Coach Tom O’Brien, ended the year ranked number 21.

Individually, several Rutgers players excelled. Quarterback Ryan Cubit had 1,432 passing yards that season. Running back Dennis Thomas rushed for 371 yards. Over his Rutgers career, Thomas gained a total of 1,139 yards. Dennis Thomas also had a total of 440 receiving yards and 1,173 yards on kickoff returns. He signed a pro contract with the Kansas City Chiefs.

Linebacker Gary Brackett won the Homer Hazel Award as the team’s Most Valuable Player. Defensive end Alfred Peterson was named a Third Team All-American by the *Sporting News*.



Nate Jones led Rutgers in all-purpose yards in 2001 with 747 yards. (Courtesy Rutgers Athletic Communications)