

Daniel 'Rudy' Ruettiger, the man whose life story inspired the beloved football movie *Rudy*, remains a man who pursues his dreams with a fervour at age 60

# Rudy, Rudy!

By Jeffrey Reed

Mention the Fighting Irish and names like Knute Rockne, The Four Horsemen, legendary head coach Ara Parseghian and quarterback Joe Montana – just to name a few – come to mind.

Yet, in the history of this storied U.S. college football team, only one player has ever been carried off the field in victory: Daniel “Rudy” Ruettiger. He dressed for only one game in 1975, and his statistics show only one tackle, but Rudy (as he has become known) is one of the most recognizable faces in Notre Dame Fighting Irish history.

Thirty-four years ago, the impossible happened. A practice-squad player, standing just 5'7" and weighing only 165 pounds, dressed for his only game, versus Georgia Tech, and made a tackle to end the football game. Of course, it was the inspirational journey, not the tackle, that has made Rudy Ruettiger a household name, thanks to the 1993 movie entitled *Rudy*.

It's hard to believe Ruettiger turned 60 years old last Aug. 23. Residing in a posh golf-course community in Las Vegas with his wife, Cheryl, and their children, Jessica and Daniel, Ruettiger still talks of his dream come true at Notre Dame with the same passion it took for him to see that dream come to fruition.

“This is life. This is not just Notre Dame!” Ruettiger says of the real-life storybook tale that has become the cornerstone of his numerous business ventures. He has travelled the world as a motivational speaker, delivering the message: *The Power of The Dream*. The Rudy Ruettiger Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to the support and recognition of those who aspire to fulfill their dreams through character, courage, contribution and commitment. The Rudy Award Program recognizes children who make an outstanding, exceptional effort to do their personal best every day.

Ruettiger is an author, a multiple award winner for his humanitarian efforts, and an entrepreneur, marketing his new sports drink, the Rudy Beverage. Recently he has had discussions to have the film *Rudy* become *Rudy: The Musical*.

Over the phone, Ruettiger sounds like he still has the energy of a teenager, evident by all of his endeavours.

The first boy and the third of 14 children growing up in Joliet, Illinois, Ruettiger watched Notre Dame, playing in Indiana, on television and idolized the Fighting Irish. He says, “It was



part of our life. It was the way to be. It was like, if I could go to Notre Dame, I can be someone. Your family's not rich. You're not a great athlete. And you know only smart kids go there.

“My dad worked three jobs just to put food on the table,” says Ruettiger. “We played football all the time – dreaming.”

Ruettiger did not fare well in high school, as he lived with dyslexia. It wasn't until he attended college that his disability was diagnosed. It's not in the movie, but after high school, Ruettiger enlisted in the U.S. Navy and served his country as a sailor aboard two ships. That stint became part of the dream. Says Ruettiger, “After you've been through something like the Navy, you have a certain level of confidence.”

After he was honourably discharged, Ruettiger returned home and worked at a power plant. In 1972, his best friend Pete, who had given Ruettiger a Notre Dame jacket on his birthday, died in an industrial accident, changing Ruettiger's life forever.

“I believe in soul mates,” says Ruettiger. “His death gave me a reason (to pursue Notre Dame). It made me realize, I better get my life straightened out.”

As Ruettiger boarded a bus and stepped on the Notre Dame campus in South Bend, he says it “cleansed all of the negative feelings I had about life and made me very powerful.”

Notre Dame remains one of the most prestigious schools in North America. Admission is highly competitive. Without the grades to enter



Notre Dame, and with the assistance of a priest – one of Ruettiger's many mentors – he was able to study at Holy Cross Junior College for two years. After three rejections, he was accepted at Notre Dame and transferred there in the fall of 1974 – at age 26.

Ruettiger was small but tough – he was a boxer at Notre Dame – and his grit and determination saw him win a spot on the practice squad as a walk-on player.

Ruettiger remembers those bruising practices. “I got hit from the blindside one day. I thought I actually died. I got hit so hard. You ever get hit by a truck?”

Despite the fact he had already overcome long odds, Ruettiger's dream wasn't complete. He wanted to play in a real home game at Notre Dame Stadium.

In 1975, Dan Devine had taken over the coaching reigns from Parseghian. In the movie, Devine is made out to be the villain, dressing Ruettiger for the final game of the regular season only after a number of his teammates asked that Ruettiger play in their place. But in reality, Devine supported the move when the team captain asked that Ruettiger dress.

“The students at Notre Dame found out about Rudy through a newspaper article,” explains Ruettiger. “I talked about ... It would be a dream come true if I could play football one time, one second for Notre Dame.”

“About three minutes left in that football game, I said, why can't I play? We're winning, it won't matter whether I play or not. When the coach says, 'Get in there Rudy,' I said, no. I'm a defensive player. He got mad! And the minute I said that, Notre Dame scored. Now they had to put me in the football game.”

And the fans chanted: “Rudy, Rudy.”

Ruettiger actually saw action for two plays. On his second play, with five seconds left on the clock, Ruettiger made the tackle.

“I remember lining up. It was so awesome



**Top right, above, far left: Today a resident of Las Vegas, Rudy Ruettiger is a popular inspirational speaker on the theme, *The Power of The Dream*; his teammates lifted Ruettiger onto their shoulders after his brief appearance in 1975; Ruettiger waits his turn on the sidelines against Georgia Tech in 1975.**

(Photos courtesy Rudy Ruettiger)

because everything goes in slow motion now,” says Ruettiger, tearing up, still emotional today. “As I tackled him, the game ended. And that's when the team picked me up. That was a special moment. A moment of pride. *The Power of the Dream*.”

Now, *Rudy: The Musical* is in the works. “It just so happens that a guy who runs a big theatre in San Diego is a Notre Dame graduate, and he loves this as a musical,” says Ruettiger. “It will be different than the movie – more uplifting.”

“It's like a little boy coming up to me today, a 10-year-old boy saying, 'I'm going to Notre Dame.' I will never say to him, you can't. I will always say to him, you're going to do it.” FY