

DAILY NEWS SPORTS



WHY?

PARENTS STILL COMING TO GRIPS WITH INFECTION THAT KILLED LYCOMING FOOTBALL STAR — AND HAS SPORTS WORLD ON ALERT

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Rick Lannetti at his son's gravesite.

JOSEPH KACZMAREK/For the Daily News

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WHIZ KID SEMINICK DIES
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Ricky Lannetti's death was a worst-case scenario of a growing problem that's affecting athletics



In 2003, Ricky Lannetti set Lycoming records for catches in a game (16) and season (70), in addition to scoring five touchdowns.



MARK LUDAK/For the Daily News

A LETHAL CATCH

By **MARK KRAM**
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Clouds of snow whipped across his windshield. In clear weather the drive to Williamsport, Pa., always took Rick Lannetti 3 hours or so, but he gave himself some extra time that cold December day, leaving his Yardley home in the emerging dawn. The turnpike had become an ever-narrowing lane of slush, the visibility poor and getting worse. But kickoff was not until 1 o'clock that Saturday, so he took it easy on the gas and even stopped for a cup of coffee. He planned to check in to his room, get a nap and then go to the field early to see his only son, Ricky, the Lycoming College wide receiver and kick returner, who that day would be playing an NCAA Division III quarterfinal against Bridgewater (Va.). "It was the biggest game of his life," Lannetti would say later. By 9:30

a.m., he was just outside of Williamsport when he received a call on his cell phone.

The voice on the other end belonged to his former wife, Terri.

"Check into your hotel and come to the hospital," she said with a pointed urgency. "Ricky is really sick."

The elder Lannetti figured it was just the flu. He was not overly alarmed because he had spoken to his son on Thursday and already knew that he had not been feeling well. With a shrug, he told himself: "Hey, I guess no ballgame for him." It was only when he got to Williamsport Hospital that he became aware of the full weight of what was happening. Ricky had been admitted at 7 a.m. in critical condition. His blood pressure had dropped to 98 over 27, and his body temperature was erratic. When Rick showed up in the intensive care unit, he was startled to discover his son with tubes running in and out of his body, traces of dry blood

on his lip and around his nose. Wide-eyed, he asked where the blood had come from, only to be told that his son had coughed it up upon entering the emergency room earlier that morning.

What followed that day still seems unreal to Lannetti. He remembers his son looking up at him and asking, "What time am I getting out of here?" The game had been rescheduled for Sunday due to unplayable conditions, and it was just like him to think that he could still hop out of bed and play in it. As each hour passed, his condition worsened despite the assortment of antibiotics that were given to him and the wide range of specialists who hovered over him. When his heart began to weaken, his doctors prepared him to be flown to the cardiac center at Temple University Hospital. His coaches and teammates joined one another in the waiting room, their faces grim, uncertain.

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JENNIFER MIDBERRY/Daily News

Terri Lannetti (above) and Ricky's former coach drove up to Lycoming on Dec. 5 to watch a playoff game, but wound up being present for the player's final hours.

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One of the doctors told Rick and Terri that their son would be fine if he got through the day, but conceded that the diagnosis remained unclear.

Lannetti remembers a doctor gravely advising him, “*Something is attacking his body...*”

Strikes all levels

Ricky Lannetti died that evening at 7:36. The autopsy that was performed 2 days later determined the cause of death to be a *Staphylococcus aureus* pneumonia and associated bacteremia. While it remains unclear exactly how the infection entered his body, it did so with a fury that swept through the 21-year-old Father Judge graduate with unsparing force. A week before he had played in the second round of the NCAA playoffs against East Texas Baptist University, only to come down a few days later with what appeared to be flu symptoms. Sadly, what no one knew until it was far too late was that he had contracted methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), a form of staph that is stubbornly resistant to commonly used antibiotics. Calling Lannetti an otherwise “excessively healthy individual,” Lycoming County coroner Charles E. Kiessling says, “This is just so tragic . . . They were treating him appropriately, but it just happened so quickly; MRSA just overwhelmed his system.”

Kiessling adds, “The issue is *how* it got into his system, whether it was from a puncture in his foot or a sore on his buttock or — and this what it sounds like — whether it was growing in his lungs.”

Staphylococcus is a common form of bacteria that humans can carry on their skin, in their nose or in the back of their throat without it ever progressing beyond that. Thirty percent of normally healthy people carry it around at any given time, according to Dan Jernigan, medical epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. Of somewhat larger concern is MRSA; the emergence of which has been traced to the overuse of antibiotics. While Jernigan points out that it very rarely leads to death and is treatable, he concedes that it can become “a nasty problem” if it enters the blood-



MARK LUDAK/For the Daily News

Rick Lannetti stands in front of a few of the clippings and photos hanging in his home that remind him of his son and his accomplished football career at Father Judge and Lycoming.

stream. Says Jernigan, who is acquainted with the Lannetti case: “Clearly, when the opportunity exists and the conditions are in place, this particular bacteria can cause a severe disease.”

Hospitals have been typical havens for MRSA for years, but it has lately emerged in the community at large among generally healthy people. Specifically, it has become an increasing problem in athletic settings at the pro, college and high school levels. The Centers for Disease Control circulated an advisory on MRSA to every NFL team last August; the organization also is addressing league physicians on the subject at a conference this month. The NCAA and the National Federation of High Schools also issued an alert on skin infections last October. Says Jeff Hogan, head athletic trainer at the University of California, Davis: “People I talk to [across the country], this is something everyone is aware of

and has experienced to one degree or another.”

Outbreaks of staphylococcus within the last year have occurred largely in close contact sports such as football and wrestling, where Jernigan says there are “skin integrity issues, shared equipment, contaminated surfaces and crowded conditions.” In the NFL last year between August and October, seven Miami Dolphins contracted it, three of whom were hospitalized; the club suspected that the bacteria was spread with the locker-room hot tub. Cases also affected teams in Cleveland, New Orleans and Tampa Bay. Seven players at the University of Southern California were identified with it before the season opener, four of whom were hospitalized; the condition also was diagnosed in six football players and a wrestler at UC Davis. Clusters also have been found at the high school level in San Antonio, where eight

players contracted the condition — including one player who was in danger of having an arm amputated; and in Franklin, Wis., where one of the four afflicted players developed what was called an “extreme case.” In an interview with the *Milwaukee Journal*, the father of the unidentified 17-year-old said: “It got into his joint, then his bone, then spilled into his blood, causing him to become septic...This is a wake-up call for everybody.”

Ordinarily, it is a process that begins under the radar as a small pimple, scrape or cut, each of which can become a portal for staph to enter the body. In the case of UC Davis quarterback Ryan Flanigan, it invaded his system when he suffered a turf burn on his right wrist. Within a few weeks, it had spread to his ring finger on that hand in the form of a cut the size of a small bug bite — irritating, yes, but hardly something that would keep him

from playing against rival Sacramento State that Saturday in early October. Hogan remembers that the tender area was cleaned and dressed, but that “literally within hours it got worse.” Flanigan played the first half, but he was overcome with fever, nausea. The finger began to swell and bleed, the hand to discolor in deepening shades of green and blue. Upon discerning that Flanigan had a MRSA in addition to a second infection, the doctors gave him antibiotics intravenously and orally during his 6 days in the hospital. Flanigan told the *Sacramento Bee*, “I went from, ‘When am I going to play again?’ to ‘I have just got to get healthy.’”

That Flanigan or others would try to play is exactly what one would expect, especially when presented with such an apparently small condition as a cut. Cleveland Browns linebacker

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RECENT CASES OF STAPH

► **August 2003:** The Southern California football team is struck by a staph outbreak before the season opener. Of the seven players diagnosed, four are hospitalized. The school does not identify the players, but fullback Brandon Hancock confirms he is one of them; he is hospitalized for 5 days. The Los Angeles County Health Department praises USC for taking speedy action.

► **August-October 2003:** Seven Miami Dolphins contract staph infection, three of whom are hospitalized: linebacker Junior Seau, return specialist Charlie Rogers, and safety Trent Gamble. Dolphins equipment manager Tony Egues observes in the Miami Herald: "It more likely is transmitted in the hot tub, or the shower area, so we are scrubbing down and using industrial strength disinfectant and crossing our fingers."

► **October 2003:** Eight football players at Brackenridge High School in San Antonio, Texas, are found to have staph infection, including one player who is in danger for a while of losing his arm to amputation. In an interview with the San Antonio Express-News, head athletic trainer says of that player, "I'd never seen anything like it except for in a textbook. He was on medication, but it wasn't working. It was a little scary." Other schools in the state also report cases.

► **October 2003:** UC Davis quarterback Ryan Flanigan is hospitalized for 6 days with a staph infection on his hand. Initially believed by Flanigan to be a ingrown hair on his finger, the hand began to swell and bleed during a game against Sacramento State. Team physician Dr. Bill Winternitz tells the Sacramento Bee that the severity of the infection was a "7 or 8 on a scale of 10." Head athletic trainer Jeff Hogan says that a half-dozen others have been affected in the past year.

► **October 2003:** Four football players at Franklin High School in Franklin, Wis., are diagnosed with MRSA, including a 17-year-old whose father says "got an extreme case." In an interview with the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, the father of the unidentified teenager says, "It got into his joint, then his bone, then spilled into his blood, causing him to become septic . . . This is a wake-up call for everybody."

► **November 2003:** Cleveland Browns linebacker Ben Taylor is hospitalized and undergoes two surgeries due to a staph infection that originated with a 1-inch scratch on his right arm. Brown begins experiencing flu symptoms that sharply worsen. In an interview later with the Akron Beacon Journal, Taylor says: "Joints, knee, muscles, head, everything was killing me. My arm ballooned out. My whole body kind of shut down."

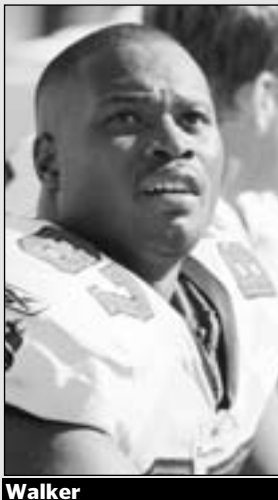


Smith

► **December 2003:** Lycoming College wideout/returner Ricky Lannetti dies of a staph infection in his lungs. The 21-year-old Father Judge

graduate experiences flu-like symptoms for 4 days before being admitted to Williamsport Hospital at 7 a.m. on Dec. 6. Lycoming County coroner Charles E. Kiessling says Lannetti "kind of spiraled throughout the day" before passing away 12 hours later.

► **December 2003:** New Orleans Saints fullback Terrelle Smith is hospitalized with a staph infection on his chin, which he says he received from a brush burn he received from artificial turf. Says Smith in the New Orleans Times-Picayune: "It was crazy, man. It swelled up so bad I couldn't even eat."



Walker

► **December 2003:** Tampa Bay Buccaneer right tackle Kenyatta Walker is hospitalized with a staph infection in his right elbow. Bucs head coach Jon Gruden characterizes it in the Sarasota Herald-Tribune as a "very major infection."

► **January 2004:** The Utah Department of Health identifies 57 high school wrestlers with rashes and another eight that "require more investigation" — including 18 at Delta High School (along with two coaches.) A department spokesperson says three organisms have shown up — strep, staph and herpes — but that so far there has been no evidence of MRSA. In an interview with the Salt Lake Tribune, physician David Hernrie says: "It could have very dire consequences . . . We have to get to the bottom of this and find a solution soon, because it has certainly upset the community."

— Mark Kram



JENNIFER MIDBERRY/Daily News

It was Terri who took Ricky to the hospital on the morning of Dec. 6: 'I still have trouble believing this really happened,' she says.

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Ben Taylor just shrugged when he spotted a 1-inch scratch on the back of his right arm last November, only to be awakened from sleep hours later with what he characterized as flu symptoms. "Joints, knee, muscle, everything was killing me," Taylor told the *Akron Beacon Journal*. "My arm ballooned out." He showed up for the team walk-through the following day, but was driven to Cleveland Clinic with a fever of 103. Two surgeries were performed there during his days in the hospital. Still unsure how the staphylococcus entered his body, Taylor told the newspaper: "It could have been from turf, from being outside on the grass, from the hot tub. A little scratch. It's crazy how things go sometimes."

Quick and aggressive action is the recommended course in dealing with MRSA, which would include two forms of therapy: one

is to essentially power wash the area in surgery; the other is to prescribe cutting-edge antibiotics such as Vancomycin or Zovox. To get a jump on detecting any problems, Hogan says he has urged the athletes to keep an eye on each other in the locker room for small sores or cuts. Since Flanigan contracted MRSA, Hogan says players have come to him and reported, "I was drying off and somebody said to me, 'Hey, you got something on the back of your neck. What is that?'" Hogan says he also reminds them to be conscious of proper hygiene, such as wearing clean clothes, using soap and water, and drying off with fresh towels. Says Hogan, "Just the normal stuff mom told you."

What remains unclear is what else could have been done for Ricky Lannetti in the week leading up to his death. The last thing anyone thought was that he

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Taylor

Photos: Getty Images

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would die — not someone so young, so strong. The only thing he was worried about was whether he would be able to play that Saturday. He had only missed one game in his entire career at Lycoming, and that was with a twisted ankle during his sophomore year. He was a hard-nosed, go-until-you-drop player who would always keep his ailments to himself. So whatever he had that was weighing him down physically, he figured it was something that he could just shake off. He presumed that the doctors could just fix him up enough to play, but by that Saturday at the hospital his body was under siege and beyond the help of medicine. Kiessling says, “It

was just a case of too little too late.”

A rapid deterioration

Terri Lannetti had driven up to Williamsport the evening before to beat the snow. With her was Bill Koch, a longtime coach at Father Judge and a friend of the family. The two had spoken to her son off and on through the week and knew he had come down with something. She planned to get him a hotel room that Friday, just to get him out of the dorm so he could get some undisturbed sleep, but her son called her on her cell phone at 9:30. He told her he was exhausted and going to go to sleep, that he would see her the following morning. So she checked into her room at 1 a.m., only to be awakened 3 hours later by the tele-

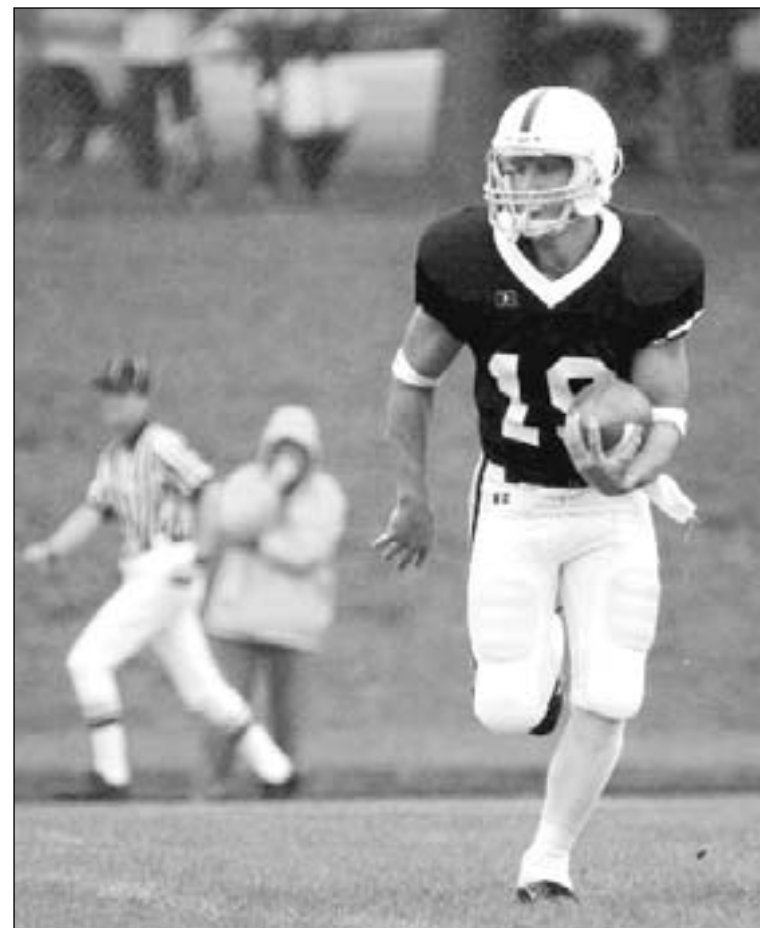
phone.

It was her son.

He sounded short of breath, weak.

“Mom,” he said, “can you come and get me?”

Knowing the younger Lannetti the way Koch and others knew him, it was understandable that he would have downplayed his sickness for as long as he possibly could. “He worked his ass off to play,” says Koch, who says Lannetti scored touchdowns at Father Judge in every conceivable manner: rushing, receiving, fumble return, interception return, kickoff return and punt return. No one else at the school had ever done that. When he moved on to Lycoming, he set school records for catches in a game (16) and in a season (70). At 5-10 and 185 pounds, he earned All-Middle At-



Not only was Lannetti a successful wide receiver, but he was also a dangerous returner, accounting for 1,759 career yards.

AN MRSA PRIMER

► What is it?

A bacteria

► What are its roots?

Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* was called “hospital *Staphylococcus*” during the 1960s as it became resistant to penicillin. A class of antibiotics called methicillin was effective for a while, but the supergerm has evolved into resistant that, too.

► How can I get it?

Like staph, it can be spread through direct close contact and not through the air. It also can spread indirectly by touching objects such as towels, sheets, wound dressings, clothes, workout areas and sports equipment. It does not survive for very long on dry, exposed surfaces, such as the face.

► How can I tell that I've contracted it?

Being alert, mostly. About 30 percent of normally healthy people carry staph on the skin or nose or in the back of the throat without causing any disease. But if it finds any type of opening in the skin, such as a scratch or cut, it can cause an infection. The symptoms vary: it will cause redness of the surrounding skin and a discharge from the wound. A more serious infection will cause a headache, malaise and a fever. Remember that MRSA

is a staph infection that is resistant to the drugs most commonly used to treat it; however, other drugs will work.

► Who's most at risk?

According to a recent study, the average age of a hospital patient with MRSA was 68. The newer community strain is different from the other one, affecting young people who are otherwise healthy. The results of the study indicated their average age was 23.

► How is MRSA diagnosed?

You have to be tested for it. A doctor will take a sample from an infected wound and grow it. Once the staph begins to grow, the doctor can determine which antibiotics will be effective for treating the infection.

► How can I lower my risk of getting it?

Exercise good personal hygiene, especially handwashing. Be vigilant about keeping an eye on any skin trauma, such as a brush burn, sore, scratch, cut or pimple.

Avoid sharing towels and other personal items. If you have a skin infection that isn't getting better, see a doctor.

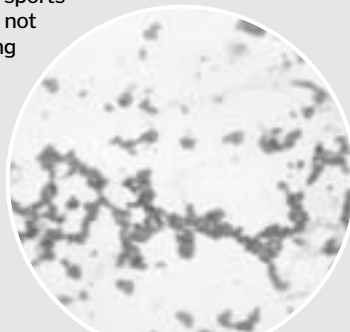
► At what point does it become dangerous?

For one, when it enters the bloodstream. In Ricky Lannetti's case, there was the complicating factor of the flu or a virus that weakened his immune system. That allowed MRSA germs to cause a deadly infection.

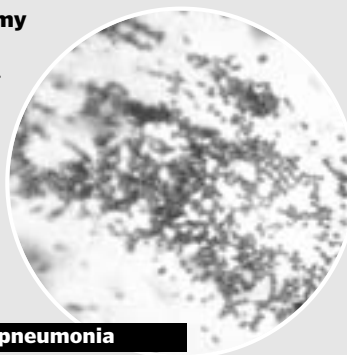
— Paul Vigna



MRSA



Staphylococcus aureus



Staph pneumonia

CATCH

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whose brother Greg had just completed his freshman year as a walk-on at Penn State when he died last May in an automobile accident. Says Hennigar, "All I ever had to do was say the word, and Ricky was there for me."

His mother drove Lannetti back to her hotel. "He laid down on the bed and then said, 'Help me up,'" she says. "And I would help him up, and then he would lay back down again. At one point, he said, 'Just lay here with me.'"

Koch called an assistant coach. "We knew we had to do something," he says. "So I called the assistant coach and he called the trainer, who met us at the football complex. Once he got there, he took a look at Ricky and led us to the hospital."

What happened then passed by in a blur. When Lannetti vomited blood on the floor of the emergency room, his mother remembers someone shouted, "You have to take him now!" She remembers feeling his hands and feet; they were cold, clammy. "He was having trouble breathing," she says. "And saying over and over again, 'I am so tired...so tired.'" When they hooked him up to a catheter, the bag filled

with what Koch remembers as "this brown mass." Doctors only then learned from him that he had not urinated in 2 days; his kidneys were shutting down. His mother held off calling his father, who she knew was on his way to Williamsport, so he would not "go crazy and have an accident getting here." When he arrived at the hospital at 10:30 a.m., he found his son in ICU with a team of specialists attending to him. With his blood pressure and pulse precariously low, they hooked him up for an EKG, which revealed that his heart was failing. The doctors told Rick and Terri that "we have no idea what we are dealing with, if it is viral or bacterial," but just hoped to stabilize him enough to fly him into Temple. He slipped into unconsciousness at 5:36 p.m. and was declared brain-dead.

Rick sighs as he remembers hearing that. "It was just like it was a dream," he says. "I was waiting for someone to tell me what to do. You are . . . well . . . I had gone up there that day to see a football game and this happened."

Terri invited the players to his bedside to say their final good-byes. "Ricky had a half-smile on his face — this smirk," she says, "as if he had just done something and gotten away with it."

Lycoming and Bridgewater played the following day. Rick, up the whole night, was driven home, finally falling asleep in the back seat. Terri decided to go to the game, if only to show her support for the grief-stricken team. Hennigar scored a touchdown, but remembers the hollow feeling as he crossed the goal line. Bridgewater ended up winning, 13-9. Wherever Terri seemed to look that day, she was reminded of Ricky. Someone had written his No. 19 in the snow and his teammates had draped his jersey over their bench. "You know, it was a weird feeling," she says. "It was sort of like he was still

there."

Passion for football

They buried Ricky Lannetti a few days later at Resurrection Cemetery, in Bensalem. In the cold days that followed, his parents have tried to piece their lives back together and come to some understanding how this could have happened. Both have been off from work since Ricky died — his mother as a Philadelphia police officer, his father as a computer analyst at Verizon. He says he spends hours upon hours each day at the computer looking up other cases



MARK LUDAK/For the Daily News



JOSEPH KACZMAREK/For the Daily News

A helmet signed by Ricky's Lycoming teammates sits in Rick's home; others surviving include mom Terri and sisters Lisa and Katie. Rick Lannetti (left) talks of placing connecting chalk lines between the grave sites of Greg Hennigar, the former quarterback, and his son, the ex-wide receiver, which sit across from each other at Resurrection Cemetery in Bensalem.

where staphylococcus has ended in fatality, but so far has found that it tends to afflict the very young or the very old, not someone as healthy and as athletic as his son. Young death is so utterly preemptive.

His former wife has her ups and downs. "Some days I feel fine, other days not so fine," she says, her eyes welling with tears. "I think about him all day. I wake up thinking about him; I go to bed thinking about him. I still have trouble believing this actually happened. I know he is in a better place."

Rick sighs. "I just want to die," says Lannetti, who had two younger daughters with his ex-wife. "If God had told me 46 years ago that He would take my only son — 21 years old — I would have told God: 'Please, I do not want to go on.' I have no desire to keep on living, but I know my daughters need me, so I try to keep it together."

The hard part is coming to terms with what could have been. Ricky Lannetti would have graduated with a degree in criminal justice and had plans of getting into law enforcement, possibly as a parole officer. He also had a cousin who is in the Secret Service, so looking into that also held some appeal. Rick adds that it would not have been beyond his son to take a shot at pro football, if not with an NFL team then in Europe or with an Arena League organization. "This kid just loved his football," says Lannetti, who began filming the games his son played when he was 5 years old. He says he now has more than 100 videotapes piled up in his house, but doubts he will ever watch them again. With voice cracking, he says, "Doing that would be just too sad."

Certain days he goes to the cemetery just to think. The graves of Ricky Lannetti and Greg Hennigar face each other, and Rick has had the idea of connecting them with chalk lines: Lannetti the wide receiver, Hennigar the quarterback. He thinks of them there together and feels better somehow. He imagines them playing catch together as they used to as boys at Father Judge, forever young and running pass patterns by the light of the moon. ★