

MARK KRAM, JR.

A Lethal Catch

FROM THE PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS

CLOUDS OF SNOW whipped across his windshield. In clear weather the drive to Williamsport, Pennsylvania, always took Rick Lannetti three 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 one o'clock that Saturday, so he took it easy on the gas and even stopped for a cup of coffee. He planned to check into 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 (Virginia). "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 ball game 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 7:00 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.

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 two 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 twenty-one-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 is 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 bloodstream. 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, Wisconsin, 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 seventeen-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 an MRSA in addition to a second infection, the doctors gave him antibiotics intravenously and orally during his six 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 Ben Taylor just shrugged when he spotted a one-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 deal-

ing 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 Zyvox. 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 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 1:00 A.M., only to be awakened three hours later by the telephone.

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 (sixteen) and in a season (seventy). At five-ten and 185 pounds, he earned All-Middle Atlantic Conference honors as a receiver (first team) and returner (second team). He had five catches in the playoff game the previous weekend against East Texas Baptist, and looked forward to the quarterfinal game against Bridgewater that Saturday with the same stubborn earnestness that underscored whatever he did on the football field. Says Koch with a grim chuckle, "When it came to playing with pain, Ricky could be kind of a knucklehead."

The first faint stirrings that something was wrong began on Monday. Koch remembers speaking to him that day, and Lannetti told him he was not feeling well; he had a cough and runny nose. On Tuesday, tight end Sean Hennigar says Lannetti practiced with the team but became woozy and sat out the final few plays. He began vomiting on Wednesday and saw the school nurse the following day. He received something to settle his stomach. Terri says she then called the head athletic trainer, Frank Neu, who arranged to have him seen by a local physician on Friday. Lannetti had some blood work done and it was initially conjectured that he could have hepatitis. Neu arranged for Lannetti to meet with the team physician at 9:00 A.M. Saturday. When he spoke to Lannetti on Friday evening, Neu says that Ricky told him he was "feeling a little better." Says Neu, "That was when he took a turn for the worse."

That Friday night was simply dreadful. In the dorm room he shared with Hennigar and linebacker Brian Connors, Lannetti was unable to get any sleep whatsoever. He was up and down, feverish. He would stretch out on his bed, then get up again and sit in the chair. Hennigar and Connors offered to take him to the hospital, but Lannetti said no; he had that appointment with the team physician later that morning and still believed he had an outside chance

of playing. Only when it became clear that his moaning was keeping both Hennigar and Connors from getting any sleep did he summon his mother, who found him in such a declining state that he could barely walk. Hennigar and Connors had to help him to the car. Seeing him in this condition was particularly upsetting to Hennigar, 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 two 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 backseat. 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 number 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 of 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 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 forty-six years ago that He would take my only son — twenty-one 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 five years old. He says he now has more than one hundred videotapes piled up in his house, but doubts he will ever watch them again. With voice crackling, 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.