



The Associated Press file photo 2008 Provided by RI  
Tom Coughlin's demanding coaching style prepared RIT to compete against football teams with more talent and better facilities.

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# Hard work takes Coughlin from RIT to Super Bowl

Scott Pitoniak  
Staff writer

Tom Coughlin was relentless — in their facemasks and helmet ear holes, all the time, pushing them to the limit.

And beyond.

Never mind that it was August and hotter than a blast furnace. Three times a day, the young, gung-ho RIT football coach from the Seneca County village of Waterloo would run his players through grueling practices. Each day, for two consecutive weeks each summer, it was football with "Coach C" — morning, noon and night, breakfast, lunch and dinner.

"It was brutal, no place for wimps," recalls Mark McCabe, one of the Tigers who endured those survival-of-the-fittest camps during the early 1970s. "I swear there were times when you wanted to strangle the guy, but you were too pooped to try."

These days, McCabe, a Rochester resident who runs an international investigative firm, would rather hug than strangle the man who drove him further than he realized he could go.

And he's hardly alone in his adoration for the coach who will lead the New York Giants against the unbeaten New England Patriots this evening in Super Bowl XLII. Most of those graduates of Camp Coughlin went from cursing him to praising him.

More than 30 of them will gather today for a reunion/Super Bowl party at the Radisson Hotel on Jefferson Road in Henrietta. It's no mystery for which team they'll be rooting.

"I'm not necessarily a Giants fan, but I am a huge Tom Coughlin fan," said Dave Mick, a former Rochester Institute of Technology defensive end who manages a liquid fuel terminal in Aurora, Ohio.

"How could I not pull for a guy who influenced my life the way Coach C influenced mine? I doubt I would have made it through school and had a successful business career if it weren't for him. And I know most of my old teammates feel the same way."

RIT was the first head coaching job for Coughlin, who had been a three-sport star at Waterloo Central and a three-year starter for a Syracuse University football team that featured All-American running backs Floyd Little and Larry Csonka.

### **Golden rule**

Coughlin spent the 1971-73 seasons with the Tigers, compiling a 16-15-2 record against Division III schools with superior players and facilities, not to mention much longer football traditions. "We often didn't match up talent-wise with our opponents, but thanks to Coach Coughlin we were usually tougher, mentally and physically, and we were always better prepared," said Ken Wegner, a trucking executive and longtime Buffalo-area high school football coach who played outside linebacker and defensive end at RIT under Coughlin.

"He was tough, but he was fair. The thing we respected about him was that he never asked you to do anything he wouldn't do. As long as you worked hard, mentally and physically, you'd be fine."

His indefatigable work ethic and his strong sense of right and wrong had been ingrained in him by his parents, Lou and Betty Coughlin, while growing up in Waterloo, a canal town about 50 miles east of Rochester.

"One morning several of us were driving to school and we decided we were going to skip school and drive to Rochester for the day," said Andrew "Ozzie" Osborne, a high school classmate of Coughlin's who tends bar at Harry's Place in Waterloo. "Tom refused to go along. We wound up dropping him off at school. That was Tom."

Competition also was Tom. Friends remember Coughlin turning even the simplest of things into challenges.

"It didn't matter if he was delivering groceries on his bike or walking home, he'd treat it like it was a race," Osborne said. "He was always pushing himself to do more and be better."

Coughlin served as the captain of the football, basketball and baseball varsity teams, leading the Indians to league titles in all three sports. Football was his passion, and during his senior season he established a school record that still stands 44 years later by scoring 19 touchdowns.

Syracuse offered a full scholarship, and the kid who grew up idolizing SU Heisman Trophy winner Ernie Davis wound up following in his footsteps at old Archbold Stadium.

"He was just a natural athlete at everything," said Joe Sposato, the longtime Waterloo athletic director who was four years behind Coughlin in school. "And he was totally unselfish. One year, the catcher on the baseball team got hurt and Tom volunteered to catch. We all looked up to him."

Coughlin was a high-honors student at Syracuse, and at RIT, he placed a heavy emphasis on academics. Some of his players occasionally attempted to skirt the rules, but you couldn't get anything past Coughlin.

"If you cut a class, he'd find out about it, and you'd be out there on the track running at 6:30 in the morning, and he'd be right there with you," said Mick, laughing.

### **People person**

He was a taskmaster, to be sure, but there was a compassionate side to him, too. He truly cared about his players as people. Just ask Ed Buda, a center from Albany, who wound up breaking his right femur (thigh bone) in practice.

Those were the days before the surgical insertion of metal plates, so Buda had to spend nearly five weeks in traction at Strong Memorial Hospital. Coughlin visited frequently.

"Despite the way he's portrayed by the media, he really is a personable, caring guy," said Buda, who runs an electrical manufacturing company in his hometown. "I was still in the hospital on Thanksgiving that year (1973), and he brought me a homemade turkey dinner with all the fixings.

"That's the Tom Coughlin I know."

His players also saw his softer side after his final season at RIT in '73. Coughlin choked up in a team meeting in which he told his players he was leaving to become an assistant football coach at SU.

"He told us that we were his first team and that he would never forget us," said Wegner. "He said to contact him if there was anything he could ever do for us, and he's been true to his word."

When Coughlin was coaching at Boston College, he frequently left Wegner game tickets. And when the one-time RIT player visited the Giants training camp in Albany last summer, he was shocked when Coughlin invited him to watch practice from the sidelines and grab something to eat in the dining hall.

"I wasn't expecting anything like that," he said. "I just wanted to say 'Hi.' But that's the way Coach C is.

"He hasn't changed his core values. Unlike a lot of people, he didn't forget his roots when he hit the big-time."

Each year, Coughlin flies his old high school coach, Bill Carey and his wife, to New York for dinner and a Giants game. In the mid-1990s, Coughlin established a \$1,000-a-year scholarship fund at Waterloo High School for college-bound student-athletes. And he contributed an undisclosed amount of money, believed to be in the high five figures, to buy weights and other equipment for its fitness center.

A few years ago, his alma mater honored him by naming its new football stadium after him. He said it was one of the biggest thrills of his life.

"The nice thing about him reaching the Super Bowl is that it reminds our kids that someone from a small town can make it big," Sposato said. "We try to remind them that it happened to Tom because of a lot of hard work and dedication."

Those who played for him at RIT more than three decades ago learned how far that can take you.

In Coughlin's case — all the way from a college that no longer has a football program to the Super Bowl in Glendale, Ariz.