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GAME of the WEEK

CHALLENGE

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PRESENTED BY:

Posted: Tuesday October 14, 2008 12:53PM; Updated: Tuesday October 14, 2008 12:58PM

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Kevin Armstrong > INSIDE HIGH SCHOOL

» ARCHIVED STORIES

Recovering Petitti returns home to heal and help his alma mater

Story Highlights

- ▶ Rob Petitti injured his Achilles while backpedaling at Rams mini-camp last April
- ▶ He is now serving as a volunteer assistant coach at Rumson-Fair Haven High
- ▶ He helped start the tradition of playing "Glory Days" after each victory

RUMSON, N.J. -- While home over the summer, St. Louis Rams offensive tackle **Rob Petitti** was fingerprinted, had his background checked and filed paperwork that required a notary's signature.

In order to become a volunteer assistant coach at Rumson-Fair Haven High, his alma mater, the 6-foot-6, 327-pound lineman, who ruptured his left Achilles tendon while backpedaling at a mini-camp last April, completed the painstaking steps for certification. Allowed by the Rams to rehab at the location of his choice while on injured reserve, he returned to his idyllic, oceanside hometown to heal and work under his old high school coach, **Shane Fallon**. "I was surprised by how thorough the process was," says the 26-year-old, who has three years and 17 starts experience in the NFL. "I thought, 'What am I getting myself into?' But you understand when you think about how you don't want dangerous people, like pedophiles, around kids."

The school does open its doors for members of its athletic Hall of Fame, though. As the only player in school history to reach the NFL, Petitti's name is well known about town. In the eight years since matriculating to Pitt for college and then being drafted by the Dallas Cowboys in the sixth round of the 2005 draft, he has remained in contact. During a bye week last season, he stood on the sidelines for a regular-season game. When the Bulldogs advanced to the Central Jersey Group II state final against Carteret (N.J.), a parent asked Petitti if he could write a motivational letter based on his experiences, which he did.

"He touched on what it meant to him as a high school player to make states," says **Bill Carasia**, a Bulldogs assistant who played alongside Petitti when they were students and helped recruit him back this season. "Even if you play at the next level, he knows these are the years that stay with you."

Driving around in his black Escalade, Petitti, who recognizes few familiar faces, has noticed the town's transformation. Where attractive, older houses once stood, newer, bigger ones have risen. But the football construction may be even greater. As Petitti remembers, there were about 30 kids on the varsity and about 200 people in the stands at Borden Stadium when he played from 1996-99. The stadium had no lights and the field was mainly dirt.

Almost a decade later, the school's homecoming court stood on three-year-old FieldTurf under the two-year-old fluorescent lights last Friday night during halftime of the Bulldogs' 24-21 comeback win over Keyport (N.J.) to improve to 4-2. An overflow crowd of young families filled the stands as Petitti limped along the



Rob Petitti, center, is volunteering as an assistant coach at Rumson-Fair Haven High in New Jersey while recovering from an Achilles tendon injury.

Kevin Armstrong

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sideline with his surgical scar showing, instructing last year's state runners up, whose successes have inspired the town's football renaissance.

"This field used to be a ghost town for games," says **Tim Sullivan**, a 36-year-old father of two who helps coach his son's Mitey Mites team. "Games have become a big community event in the last few years."



Despite being back at the Jersey Shore, Petitti has not rested much. **Awake by nine most mornings, he works out with John O'Connor, a chiropractor and personal trainer.** Recently he began doing pool work, backpedaling, running and jumping at the Atlantic Club in Red Bank, N.J., a nearby town where Petitti lives in his parent's house.

"I've thought about maybe coming back and getting into coaching or training offensive linemen down the road," says Petitti, who is back to jogging outdoors and plans to be back at full strength by December. "I'm not done playing though."

In 1998, when Petitti was a junior and the Bulldogs made their run at the states, he joined Carasia and a few teammates in mandating that **Bruce Springsteen's Glory Days** be played after each win, home or away. Less than a mile from the high school, Springsteen, who has made a career of writing songs about the area, lives in a gated estate.

After the homecoming game last Friday, with co-eds and cheerleaders idling outside the Dawg Pound -- the school's cramped-quarters locker room -- there was Petitti, helping disassemble video equipment with the coaching staff. When all was done, he clutched one his linemen on the shoulder and said, "I'm not leaving until I hear a playing of *Glory Days*."

With that, the familiar Jersey Shore ballad blasted from the speakers.

Yeah, just sitting back trying to recapture a little of the glory of,

well time slips away and leaves you with nothing mister but boring stories of glory days ...

For the players, homecoming would continue through the night. For Petitti, the tune will carry through the season.

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