

SPORTS

Keeping the goal

Legacy of great NJ soccer goalkeepers still being written

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Kris Peat grew up in two worlds, 45 miles apart. He and his younger brother Kirk lived in rural Vernon. Their father was a high school basketball and track coach. But they were surrounded by “different guys from ethnic backgrounds” who played a different sport.

The Peat brothers embraced “this thing called soccer,” where they could run and jump and try to kick the ball through a backyard goal their father constructed out of PVC pipe.

It was the late 1970s, and the range of clubs and players familiar today just didn’t exist.

After playing with much older neighbors, Kris Peat discovered Kearny Thistle, a youth team based in the Hudson County soccer hotbed. The 90-minute drive soon became routine, and sometimes Peat would stay with a teammate to avoid all the time on the backroads.

Nearly everyone on that team – a roster which included future United States national team stars Tab Ramos and John Harkes, future Rutgers men’s soccer coach Dan Donegan, and long-time Kearny boys coach Billy Galka – went on to play NCAA Division I soccer, made the USMNT, or turn pro.

Peat checked every box, becoming a high school All-American at Vernon, the goalkeeper for the U.S. under-18 team, and set North Carolina State records for single-season saves and career shutouts which still stand. He went on to play professional soccer both indoors and outdoors, retiring in 1999 after 10 years with the Wichita Wings.

“It was like I lived two different lives,” said Peat, now the associate head women’s soccer coach at the University of Denver.

“I had my soccer family down in Kearny, and I had the people I grew up with in Vernon. Looking back on it, it was kind of cool because I was exposed to so many different people.”

Peat didn’t think of himself as a role model or an inspiration. But he gave a young Kearny goalkeeper a path to follow.

“We were local guys hearing about local guys,” said Tony Meola, who played soccer, basketball and baseball for Kearny High School.

“There became a certain pride about being a goalkeeper from New Jersey. People always

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Legacy

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joke, ‘Is there something in the water?’ There is something in the water, but I don’t know if it helps goalkeepers. There was just a long line.”

Tim Howard was the next in line, jumping almost directly from North Brunswick High School to Major League Soccer’s MetroStars, who played at the Meadowlands. Meola and Ramos – who had represented the United States as the World Cup came here in 1994 – were already there to make him welcome. Meola and Howard trained together and became road roommates.

In 2020, there were 11 goalkeepers in MLS and the top two United Soccer League divisions – including Howard, who capped his long career by playing six games with Memphis 901, a team for which he is a minority owner and sporting director.

California has the most, 33 goalkeepers across the three leagues. But per capita, New Jersey’s “GK Union” has more members – and that doesn’t even count guys playing overseas, like Randolph graduate Mike Lansing.

“(Tim Howard) was a big idol for myself. Tony Meola, the same,” said Evan Louro, who grew up in Elizabeth and South River, and played for the Red Bull New York academy.

“That’s not just a Jersey soccer icon. That’s a U.S. Soccer icon, both of them. To have them both come from New Jersey, it was easy to look up to both of them.”

Why has New Jersey continued to be such a hotbed for goalkeepers?

As MLS opened camps on March 1 and begins full team training Monday, USA TODAY NETWORK New Jersey talked to five current pros who came together to train during the offseason, as well as several others, to find out.

Melting pot

Kris Peat grew up around mainly German and Eastern European immigrants in Vernon. His “soccer family” in Kearny came from many other nations, including Ramos, whose family emigrated from Uruguay when he was 11.

A first-generation Italian-American, Meola had to teach his father about baseball when he started playing. Rafael Diaz was born in the Dominican Republic, but his family emigrated to Paterson when he was 2 and then relocated to Rockaway.

“It’s a melting pot within the melting pot of the country,” said Dylan Castanheira of Roxbury, who signed with MLS’ Inter Miami CF in January after two years on USL teams.

“It’s a place where immigrants came in previous generations, set down roots and raised a family, but kept those European and South American influences. ... That’s how I got into soccer. My whole family is from Portugal, so soccer is the sport I signed up for.”

In addition to their love of soccer, the



Eddie Duffy, bar manager at Scots American Club, shows off a photograph of the 1994 U.S. National Team featuring three Kearny natives John Harkes, Tab Ramos and Tony Meola in this file photo from 2018. AMY NEWMAN/NORTHJERSEY.COM

Jersey Goalkeepers 2020

Major League Soccer

Bobby Edwards (Parsippany), Cincinnati

Bryan Meredith (Scotch Plains), Vancouver

Tyler Miller (Woodbury), Minnesota

Matt Turner (Park Ridge), New England

USL Championship

Ciaran Dalton (Harrison), New York Red Bulls II

Rafael Diaz (Paterson/Rockaway), Sacramento

Tim Howard (North Brunswick), Memphis

Eric Klenofsky (Lincoln Park/West Milford), Tacoma

Evan Louro (South River), Tampa Bay

USL League One

Matthew Broomall (Somers Point), Richmond

Dylan Castanheira (Landing), Fort Lauderdale

new New Jersey residents brought a work ethic which was instilled in their kids.

That determination combined with the lack of playing time, the need for a pickup team to keep winning to stay on the field.

“Now, they get to train three, four times a week and it’s position specific. The coaching has evolved,” Peat said. “But I think the mentality of the players who succeed, especially at goalkeeper, are still those who are a little bit hard-knock kids who are super competitive. ... Talking to other players I know from New Jersey, there’s no ball that’s not saveable. There’s always a way to save it. You just have to find that way.”

Multi-sport athletes

Look no further than Peat, Meola and Howard for examples of the success of the multi-sport athlete turned goalkeeper.

Howard could dunk a basketball

when he signed with the MetroStars. Meola played baseball, and both he and Peat’s sons grew up playing America’s pastime — as well as soccer.

Matt Turner came to soccer late, becoming a goalkeeper because his older sisters’ team needed one. Turner, who grew up in Park Ridge playing football, baseball and basketball, used to tag along to practice when their parents didn’t have a babysitter.

“When I was growing up it was never, ‘Oh, you just play one sport,’” said Turner, who earned a shutout in his first USMNT appearance.

“You get a lot of goalkeepers who also play basketball and also play baseball. I think that helps round people out as athletes in general. Goalkeepers need to be athletes first.”

Opportunities aplenty

When Meola was establishing himself, internet access was nonexistent or limited, and satellites were required to watch international matches. MLS didn’t launch until the spring of 1996, before many current pros were born.

But now, New Jersey is a hotbed of high-level club teams for boys and girls – and the training starts very young. The current pros singled out Players Development Academy in Zarephath, TSF Academy in Lincoln Park, Cedar Stars, Denville-based Match Fit, and the Red Bulls’ own academy. Whether they’re trying to earn playing time, or to catch a college coach’s eye, there’s plenty of competition.

“The first mission, always for me, was to be the best goalkeeper in our state. Things weren’t so nationalized,” said Meola, who co-hosts a weekly soccer show on SiriusXM.

“Kids now are seeing kids around the world when they’re 8, 9 years old. It’s a completely different level of understanding your position. It’s completely different than what we were exposed to.”

Forming GK Union

Eric Klenofsky has become a connector for New Jersey’s goalkeepers, particularly those who grew up around Morris County. Klenofsky, a DePaul and Monmouth alumnus who recently retired to become the University of South Florida goalkeeper coach, was already training with Monmouth goalkeeper coach Jamie Cleland.

Klenofsky reached out to Louro, who is now with the USL’s Tampa Bay Rowdies, and Parsippany native Bobby Edwards, who moved from FC Cincinnati to Indy Eleven during the winter. All three had played together for the Red Bulls’ under-23 PDL team during college. They stretched out to bring in Castanheira and Lansing, high school rivals who also have Red Bulls ties.

At 6-foot-6, Klenofsky and Edwards are taller than the others, so Cleland said they catch the ball differently. Lansing is “a lot more athletic” than the rest, according to Cleland.

“The only people to have our backs are other goalkeepers,” said Lansing, who recently moved Alesunds in Norway after 4½ years in Denmark. “We all know what it’s like to let in a (poor) ball, or deal with the criticism after a loss. It all falls on your shoulders, and it’s a lot to bear. From one goalkeeper to another, you understand what they’re going through.”

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