



Newsday / Jim Cummins

The bigger football powers now join Albany State recruiter Mike Simpson, left, with Basim Grant of New Utrecht

## Recruiters Turn to City

Once upon a time, Bernie Wyatt and George O'Leary had the city to themselves. Oh, a few others came around every now and then to see a kid here and there, but when it came to consistent recruiting by major Division I colleges, Wyatt and O'Leary had plenty of elbow room on the city's high school football fields.

Not any more. Nowadays, pioneers such as Wyatt and O'Leary have loads of company as they troll about the city looking for players. In fact, many high school coaches say college recruiters are coming around in unprecedented numbers.

"It's apparent the major colleges are opening up the door for New York," Sheepshead Bay coach Dick Reilly said.

"You can see it more every year — kids are going to more and more major schools."

Added Susan Wagner's Al Paturzo: "We felt that from about the last three or four years, they're finally coming in and not overlooking us, and they're doing a good job. . . . Now they know they have to go through us."

Reilly, Paturzo and their brethren are unanimous in giving credit for the turnaround to Wyatt and O'Leary. Both are native Long Islanders who had high school coaching jobs on the Island before moving out to colleges. Wyatt was an assistant at Iowa for 16 years before moving to Wisconsin in 1990. O'Leary was at Syracuse from 1979 to 1986 before heading to Georgia Tech, where he was named head coach last month.

When the pair started, the city largely was considered a geographic inconvenience, a place one had to drive through to get from New Jersey to Long Island, regions considered more fertile recruiting areas. Then there was the city's reputation

Wyatt said. "A lot of people were afraid to go in there. I think they didn't know anybody, they didn't know their way around. You always hear about the worst in the New York papers and news. People today won't go in there. . . . A lot of people go as far as North Jersey and then they stop."

That left the city wide open for Wyatt and O'Leary and the pair took advantage. Paturzo affectionately referred to what they did as "stealing guys." At the foundation was their belief there were players worth pursuing.

"It's like every other sport," O'Leary once said. "There's great talent up there, great potential and great numbers."

The watershed moment came in the early 1980s, when Wyatt signed Ronnie and Kevin Harmon from Bayside and Owen Gill, Devon Mitchell and Nate Creer from Tilden. Ronnie Harmon, Gill and Mitchell still rank either first or second among Iowa's career leaders in receiving, rushing and interceptions, respectively. All three went on to the NFL.

O'Leary signed Lehman's Doug Marone for Syracuse in 1982 and later got Wagner's Bobby Rodriguez, Moses Thompson and Derrick Hamilton from Bayside and Rich Strohmeier of Holy Cross for Georgia Tech. Indiana landed New Dorp's Hurvin McCormack and McKee's Willie Graham.

"What happened I really believe is that the kids that we got got a lot of exposure and we've been fairly successful," Wyatt said both of Iowa and Wisconsin. "They were not just playing, we were winning with them."

Progress, though gradual, also was maddeningly slow. Take the case of Vernon Turner. He graduated from Curtis in 1986 but escaped attention, ending up at NAIA member Carson-Newman. Now Turner is in the NFL with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

High school coaches said one reason for the continuing scarcity of college coaches was the academic problems many recruits faced. As Fort Hamilton coach Vincent Laino said, "It's really hard to get a really good player who has the grades."

by the players' athletic skills. "[The colleges] are coming because there's city kids out there who have proven they can play Division I football," John Adams coach Angelo Palumbo said. "It's opening up the doors for kids."

The city, too, has become more adept at showcasing its players. December has become the month of senior all-star games with four such contests offered by the CHSFL and PSAL. Three years ago, the CHSFL opened its Thursday all-star practice and added a dinner that evening and routinely draws about 40 colleges for the affair; this year, 44 attended. Practices for the Brooklyn game were attended by about 30 schools, including Wisconsin, Penn State, Boston College, Syracuse, Indiana, Ole Miss, Tulane, Rutgers, Temple and Maryland.

Some coordination problems still need to be worked out: All three PSAL games were scheduled during a two-hour period last Saturday, cutting down on attendance at each.

Other positive factors cited by coaches included increased newspaper coverage of games, the television broadcast of the PSAL championship game and the increasing involvement of city coaches in the state organization and the resultant increase in publicity. And, naturally, there are the players.

Sign of the times: Holy Cross defensive back Brian Farrington recently committed to Duke. One Duke official could not remember the Blue Devils ever getting a city player.

Conservative estimates have as many as 20 seniors getting Division I scholarships, eight or nine at the major-college level.

"There's a lot of people recruiting back there now," Wyatt said. "The ACC is recruiting, the Big East is recruiting, the Pac-10 comes in for a superstar every now and then. The Big Ten schools are in there, the Big Eight is in there."

And it all began with Wyatt and O'Leary.

"I don't know if I take any credit, we're just two guys trying to do our job and get guys who can play winning football," Wyatt said. "We always thought this was fertile ground. Now everyone else is catching on."

### SCHOLAR ATHLETE



Kelly Olino  
Townsend Harris

When Townsend Harris junior Kelly Olino talks about her academics and athletics, she almost sounds like legendary football coach Vince Lombardi, who was noted for his maxims on work ethic.

For example: "Working hard was the biggest thing I was taught," Olino said. "What's that old saying? 'A job worth doing is worth doing right?' I try hard all the time."

But if you think what Olino says only sounds good, check out how she uses it in practice.

Olino, 16, a starter on the girls basketball team and a New York Newsday all-Queens softball shortstop last season, has a 95 cumulative academic average and scored a 1,330 on the PSAT.

She won an award last year for a high score on a national Latin exam and has been a member of the Arista National Honor Society since junior high school.

She also is the basketball team's point guard, averaging eight points and five assists this season. In softball last year, she hit .544 with five home runs and 23 RBI and emerged as one of the PSAL's best fielding shortstops with one of the city's strongest arms.

Olino also plays softball year-round for the Queens American Softball Association under-16 team.

Until this school year, she also competed in Irish dancing on the national level.

"It's phenomenal," said Kelly's mother, Rita. "She comes home from games and then she's up 'til the wee hours studying."

"You get home after practice or a game and you don't sit around, you do your work," Olino said. "I think my parents instilled self-pride in me. I feel bad if I don't do my best."

"I like school because I like to be informed. You can be your own person with knowledge and you get a sense of accomplishment. Success in school also brings self-confidence when you see what you can do. It happens with sports, too."

As a leader on the court, Olino has gotten an extra taste of that self-confidence.

"At the point, you have to make sure that the team gets the absolute best shot," Olino said. "You have to look at the whole floor. You can't dribble into nowhere."

If her work in high school is any indication, Olino won't, either on the court or off.

— Anthony McCarron