

follow the leader

By Hasim Phillips

Tiquan Underwood became a starter four games into his sophomore campaign and emerged as one of the top receivers on the team last season. Underwood returns for his third year, again in his role as a starter which has become quite familiar to him, however, he now must adjust to one other responsibility - LEADER.

As one of the most experienced players in a deep and talented receiving corps, Underwood will look to guide his fellow pass-catchers into the 2007 season, the same way those before him helped lead a young, gifted receiver from Lawrenceville in 2005.

"I don't see it as pressure, I actually look forward to being the leader of the group now," said Underwood. "I looked up to the older guys ahead of me, like Tres Moses and Shawn Tucker, and now I have guys looking up to me. I'm looking forward to that leadership role."

When Underwood arrived at Rutgers in 2005, he was coming off an outstanding track and field career at Notre Dame High School during which he won state titles in the hurdles, long jump and triple jump. His athleticism and versatility was evident the moment he stepped on the field as Underwood earned playing time as a true freshman.

He proved to be an effective kick returner, leading the BIG EAST and ranking 19th nationally in kick return average (27.1 yards), including a season-long 59-yard return against Louisville. Underwood was also utilized as a quarterback in the shotgun formation, occasionally taking the direct snap.

Having the opportunity to get on the field and contribute as a freshman was integral in how quickly Underwood was able to progress. He was able to apply the skills he learned in practice to real-game situations.

"I think playing as a true freshman helped big time," said Underwood. "There is nothing like game experience. Practice is hard but it's nothing like being out there in a game. It really helped going into my sophomore season because I knew what to expect."

Underwood joined a group of outstanding receivers his first year, which featured BIG EAST stars Moses and Tucker. But of the two, it was Tucker who had the most influence on Underwood's growth and maturity as a receiver.

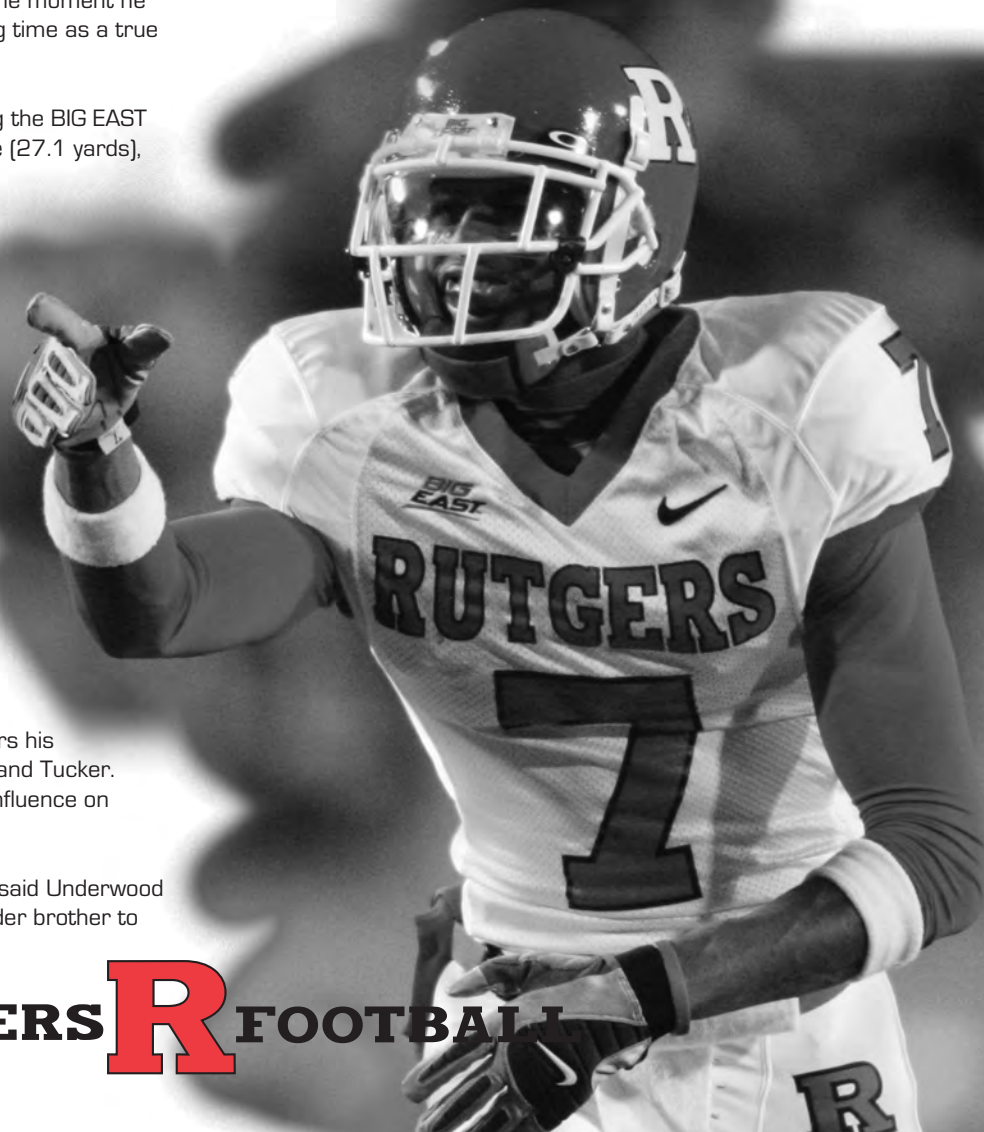
"From day one Tuck[er] took me under his wing," said Underwood of his former mentor. "He was basically like an older brother to

me. He showed me the ins and outs on the field, in the classroom and even spiritually. He's been a positive influence from day one."

Tucker's influence played a major role in his development and the bond they shared was very apparent as Underwood sported patches with the word 'TUCK' below his eyes to honor his mentor who was sidelined four games into the 2006 season.

Although the timing was bitter-sweet - having become a starter after the person he looked up to was injured - Underwood welcomed the chance to step into a starting role and help his teammates anyway possible.

The situation also prepared Underwood for a time when he would later face a tough circumstance of his own. Towards the end of his sophomore season, which he led all wide receivers with four touchdowns (23 receptions, 290 yards); Underwood suffered a leg injury in the regular-season finale. As a result, he was forced to miss the Texas Bowl and cheer his teammates on from the sideline.



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"Watching Tuck[er] go through the season, knowing he wasn't going to be able to play really helped me when I got hurt," explained Underwood, about missing the Texas Bowl. "I knew how to handle it. How I got my opportunity with him getting hurt, Tim Brown got his opportunity when I got hurt. All of us made the best of the situation. I really call it a blessing in disguise. You have to be happy for your teammates when they get in there and do well."

"Personally, I think I'm more of a lead by example guy," said Underwood. "I go out there and try to get my job done, but I'm going to try and be more vocal because you need that amongst a group."

When 2007 arrived, Underwood saw it as his opportunity to take over the reigns as a leader and positive influence for his teammates. He realized that many of the younger players on the team looked up to him and it was his duty to make sure he steered them down the right path.

When asked of his leadership style, Underwood describes himself as a guy who lets his work do the talking, however, he does understand the importance of being vocal when need be. He knows that for the team to have success, everyone must be on the same page.

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The Scarlet Knights possess a dynamic collection of receivers who will help to create a solid passing attack and provide balance for the offense in 2007. With an outstanding mix of talent, size, speed and athleticism, the Rutgers receiving game is sure to be equally as potent as the run.

Among those equipped with all the necessary tools to dominate in the passing game is Kenny Britt, a physical receiver at 6-4, 205 pounds and the 5-8, 160-pound speedster Tim Brown. Along with Underwood, this trio will serve as a solid foundation of targets for quarterback Mike Teel.

"We have an explosive group, everyone brings something to the table," said Underwood. "We are deep and we have a lot of athletes at that position."

A New Jersey native, Rutgers was a perfect fit for Underwood. During the recruiting process he developed a great connection with the coaching staff and fell in love with the facilities and the overall atmosphere.

Last season's success brought about an added sense of excitement for Underwood, who enjoyed watching his team return pride to his home state. Being able to represent for New Jersey brought about

great feelings for him and the support he received off the field was overwhelming.

"I'm really enjoying it," said Underwood of his time at Rutgers. "It's been going by pretty fast, but I'm just cherishing the moment. The program is on the rise and looking to get better. Off the field, it's a great institution and I've just been having fun since I got here."

Like any good leader, Underwood's personal goals go hand in hand with the group's ultimate goal. He doesn't put much thought into rankings and expectations; his only concern is how the team will perform as a whole.

"I want our team to be the best that we can be," said Underwood. "We have a lot of talent, we just got to put it together and gel. Once that happens, the sky is the limit. We can't worry about other teams and how they play, we just have to worry about ourselves."

