

# SPORTS

## A second chance at college football

Warriors have had success helping players who didn't get noticed

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Ross Spadavecchia thought his football dream was over.

Having kicked one year at Monmouth Regional High School, Spadavecchia wanted to play at a four-year university.

But he couldn't afford college. With no scholarship offers, Spadavecchia stuck with soccer and went to Brookdale Community College where there was no football team.

See **WARRIORS**, Page 2B

## Warriors

Continued from Page 1B

The dream was over. But then he heard about the New Jersey Warriors.

A junior college football program based in Jackson, the Warriors take community college athletes from across the state and prepare them for four-year football programs.

### A path in football

The team has had success shipping out players to big college football programs. Spadavecchia, now a senior at Monmouth University, took kickoffs as a reserve for the Division I FCS football team last season.

"I knew I wasn't going to play football until I heard about the Warriors," Spadavecchia said. "I couldn't wait to jump on the opportunity to play."

Shawn Kennish founded the team in 2017. He says he wanted to give kids who didn't fit into the typical four-year athlete mold an opportunity to extend their football careers with the goal of eventually making it to a four-year school.

Some kids can't afford to attend college without any scholarship money. Others don't have the grades to get an offer and use community college to improve their transcripts.

Some simply aren't recruited heavily and don't get any offers out of high school.

"I founded the team because I knew kids were coming home and their careers were over," Kennish said. "There was nowhere to keep playing."

The Warriors charge their players an "athletic fee" and will play an eight-game schedule against junior colleges and four-year junior varsity teams. Kennish said coaches and staff also serve as mentors and help athletes compile video portfolios and develop transcripts. They also pick up the phone to sell coaches at bigger programs on the kids, he said.

### A second chance

One of the defensive coaches — Tyler Kazio — has a friend who offers tutoring to players for free.

"We have so many players that need help one way or another," Kennish said. "We have to figure out what these players need and guide them to that goal."

Joseph Maffei joined the Warriors after working for one year as a mechanic after high school. A Jackson Memorial graduate, Maffei played one season at Kings but says he had more to give as a football player.

Maffei plays for the Warriors with

the intention of getting more film that recruiters can see - and finding his way to a traditional college football program.

"They are so good at making sure your school work is ready, your film is ready, that everything you need to be a four-year student is ready so that when those coaches come knocking, they have no chance of saying 'they don't have the grades,'" Maffei said. "They make sure each player is ready to get sent out. They're not holding people back to make sure they have a good program."

### Justin Tucker's comeback story

Countless Division 1 programs courted Toms River East graduate Justin Tucker as a freshman in high school due to his massive size (6-foot-5, 250 pounds). A knee injury and brain surgery wiped out his sophomore and junior seasons. By time he was a senior, the overtures from Division 1 coaches dried up, and Tucker didn't have a place to play.

Tucker is now going the JUCO route to prove he can still play at a high level and make it to a Division 1 school.

"I wanted to give myself an opportunity to expose myself a little more," Tucker said. "I'm very confident in what that happens."

For a group of people who have day jobs and receive very little financial compensation from the team, helping out kids who need it is what it's all about.

"It's why we do it," Kennish said. "We take young people locally and use the sport to help change their lives. It's very, very fulfilling. It means so much."

### Warriors to keep an eye on

Player assessments from Warriors' Director of Player Recruiting Chris Melvin:

**Justin Tucker, 6-5/250 DLM:** Has added about 20 pounds of muscle along with more explosion since graduating from Toms River East High School and has went from a mid to higher level recruit by doing so.

**Joseph Maffei, 6-3/220 LB:** Is a relentless backer out of Jackson Memorial High School who roams the field like a defensive back because of his athleticism; an excellent tackler and can also line up at receiver; will be a heck of a backer at the next level.

**Eke Nkambi, 6-4/260 DL:** From Nottingham High School, a sensational player in the trenches with great skills and character with one gear: full speed.

**Tayo Isadare, 6-1/210 OLB/DE:** Outstanding athlete who was a running back at Hightstown High School, now a quality linebacker; blessed with speed, power, drive and the ability to run past offensive blockers at will.

**Alejandro Santiago, 6-1/230 LB:** Played at St. Thomas Aquinas, a tough player in the middle of the defense and smooth runner who flows to the ball fluidly.

**Yahmal Johnson, 6-1/195 OLB:** Out of Lakewood, has a great deal of athleticism that allows him the ability to stop the run or drop into coverage.

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