

Photo: Gary Gold

THE NEW YORK GIANTS: **BIG MEN ON CAMPUS**

Autograph Alley: Young fans eagerly seek the autograph of a Giants team member in "Autograph Alley" on the UAlbany campus.

By PAUL GRONDAHL

The excitement is palpable as afternoon practice at the New York Giants summer training camp wraps up at the University at Albany. Fans begin to surge forward, pressing three and four deep against temporary fencing that forms a narrow chute leading from UAlbany's lower practice fields to the

The simpatico relationship between the University and the New York Giants began in 1996. The benefits are clear for both sides.

RACC. This is "Autograph Alley," and it is a magnet for more than 500 fans of all ages who arrive daily to watch practices four weeks each summer. The camp just concluded was the ninth consecutive year that the University has hosted the National Football League team, and the benefits are clear for both sides.

A searing sun beats down on this hot and humid late-August afternoon. Perspiration streams down the faces of players. Their jerseys and uniforms are grass-stained and sweat-streaked from two hours of exertion. They trudge up from the fields, exhausted.

How the Giants Came to UAlbany

Jon Berger, B.S. '85, often gets credit for being the catalyst in bringing the Giants summer training camp to the University nine years ago. But he says it was actually his wife's idea. Berger, the Giants' director of information technology, is married to Alicia Cassio, who is also a University graduate, with a 1983 bachelor's degree in political science and a 1985 master's degree in public administration. The couple were talking over dinner after Berger learned the Giants were planning to move their training camp from Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey after seven years.



The off-season acquisitions of quarterbacks Kurt Warner, left, a two-time NFL Most Valuable Player, and No. 1 overall draft pick Eli Manning added increased interest to the Giants summer camp this year.

Inset: First-year coach Tom Coughlin, right, with Interim President John Ryan



Photo: Mark Schmidt

"I told my wife some of the campuses the Giants were considering, and she urged me to recommend the University at Albany," he said. "I brought UAlbany to the table and put the parties in touch with each other."

Berger's first move was to fax his mentor, the University's head football coach, Bob Ford, to say that the Giants were shopping for a new summer training facility. "Coach Ford really got me started on this career path and taught me the administrative end of football," said Berger, who was student manager of the football team under Ford while majoring in computer science and math. Berger began working part-time with the Giants as a student and was hired full-time after graduation.

The first year, 1996, the costs of training camp were underwritten by the city of Albany with a community development grant. The *Times Union* newspaper underwrote the next seven years. In 2004, the Giants began picking up the costs, which typically run in the \$175,000 range. The investment is recouped through parking fees, tickets to special events, and corporate sponsorships.

The University assists by offering the expertise of its staff, but does not make any direct payments.



Jon Berger, B.S. '85

Photo: Mark Schmidt

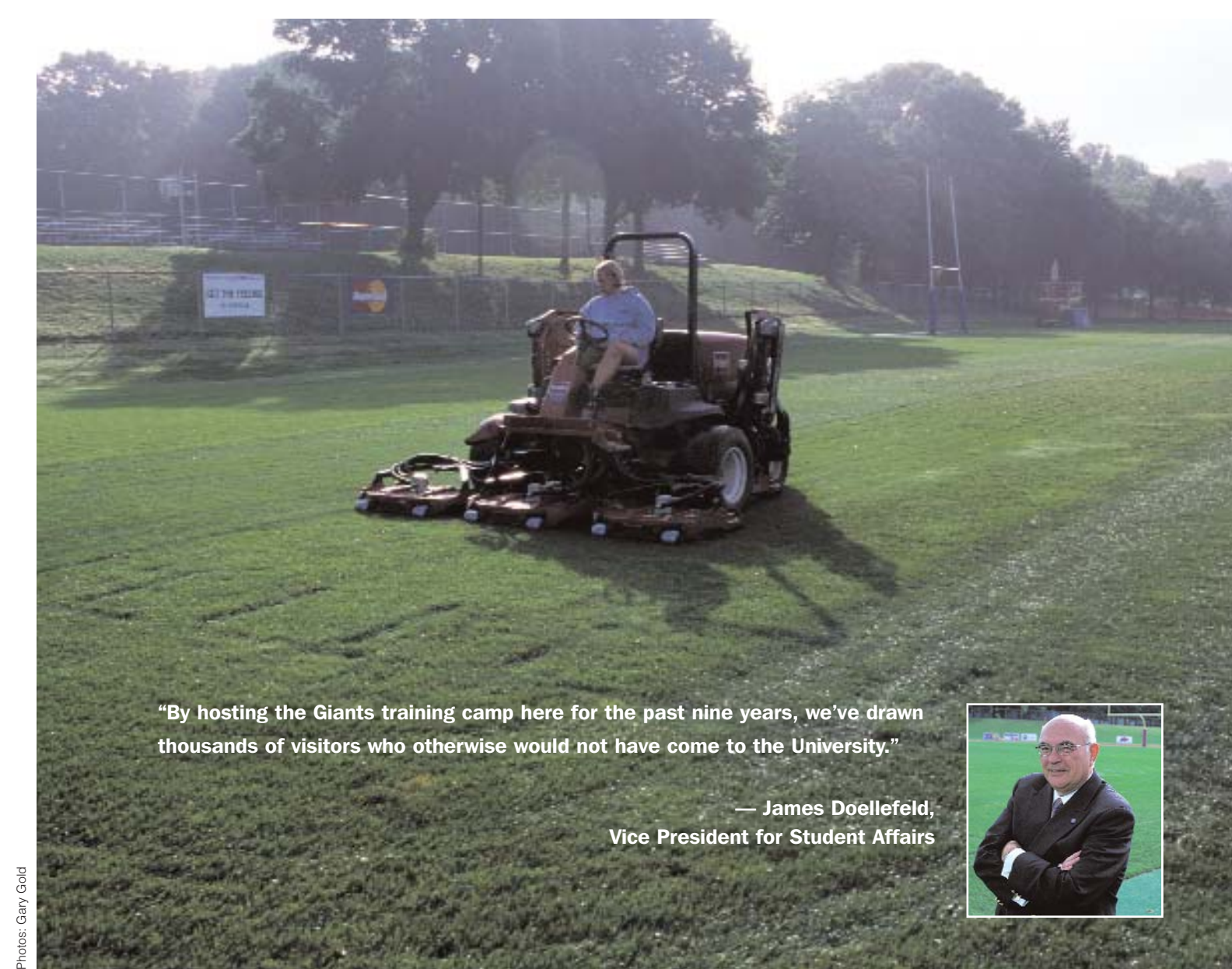
Then they encounter the fans, and a buzz rises up as the fans shout out their favorite players' names. "Hey, Tiki!" "Michael, over here!" They're leaning over the top of the fencing, drawing as close as possible to their team. The bone-tired players are revived by this show of adulation. Smiles crease their faces. They stop, set down helmets and begin to sign an assortment of Giants items thrust toward them. Ryan Gahan and Ron Dobies, both 14, are pleading with the players for a tangible piece of celebrity. Two players each pull off a wristband and autograph them for Gahan and Dobies as they chat with the youths.

It's obvious the Giants literally would give the shirts off their backs for these fans. In that same spirit, as the team's host, the University does everything it can to meet the team's needs.

"By hosting the Giants training camp here for the past eight years, we've drawn thousands of visitors who otherwise would not have come to the University," said James Doellefeld, vice president for Student Affairs. "It's also an investment in galvanizing relationships between the greater community and the University. It's about giving back."

The University won a stiff competition to host the Giants after the team had trained at a number of other colleges and universities over the years. Those who have followed the team

Photos: Gary Gold



"By hosting the Giants training camp here for the past nine years, we've drawn thousands of visitors who otherwise would not have come to the University."

— James Doellefeld,
Vice President for Student Affairs



Grooming a Giants practice field at UAlbany

at previous locales rate the University No. 1. "We've been following the Giants at their training camps since they were at Pace and Fairleigh Dickinson, and the University at Albany is much nicer," said Shirley Mosher, who attended training camp in August 2003 with her husband, Ed. The retired couple lives in Dolgeville, N.Y., about 60 miles west of Albany.

What's more, *Sports Illustrated* writer Peter King, who makes an annual NFL training camp tour, praised the University's "expansive grass practice fields" in 2003 and raved about the food served to the team on Indian Quad, giving it a letter grade A and remarking that "the Giants lead the NFL in the training table."

"Having the Giants training camp in Albany is wonderful exposure for the capital city and the University," said Albany

Mayor Jerry Jennings, who joined state officials and University administrators in helping to bring the Giants to town. "The University has created a first-class training facility for a first-class organization."

The benefits flow both ways. The Giants retreat to a quiet, comfortable upstate setting far from the distractions of New York City and get down to the serious business of preparing for another grueling NFL season — all the while receiving the sort of attention that many other NFL teams would envy. The University receives terrific exposure in sports pages and electronic media around the nation, as well as strong community building within the Capital Region among fans who attend. In addition, the Giants join UAlbany in raising funds for scholarships through special events each summer.



“It’s a lot of heavy lifting and sweaty grunt work, but we get it done.”
— Kevin Galuski,
head equipment manager

Photo: Gary Gold

“We’re very happy about our relationship with the University at Albany, and we’re looking forward to our first camp there under the leadership of our new head coach, Tom Coughlin,” Pat Hanlon, vice president of communications for the Giants, said as the team prepared for its 2004 summer camp at UAlbany. “They provide a facility that allows us to properly prepare for our regular season. We also have the support of a University staff and leadership that works its collective rear end off to make sure our camp operates smoothly.”

What the fans don’t see is extensive, behind-the-scenes work involving dozens of University staff members who take on special assignments in

addition to their normal work duties. They’re coordinated by Cynthia Brady, director of operations for student affairs, who acts as liaison to the Giants staff. Beginning in March, Brady begins organizing regular planning meetings with representatives from two dozen departments involved in training camp.

Some of the heaviest lifting falls to Kevin Galuski, head equipment manager for the University’s athletic department. “We’re like the Marines, and our motto on camp is: ‘We’re the first ones in and the last ones out,’” Galuski said. He hires 20 University athletes and other students to move athletic department staff out of their offices and into temporary quarters so that the Giants’

coaches can take over the third floor of the RACC and 15 offices in the Physical Education Building. After four days of labor, his crew is finished and ready to unload three tractor-trailers filled with more than 10 tons of weight-training equipment driven up from the Giants’ home at the Meadowlands in East Rutherford, N.J. The crew also moves in 93 lockers and other equipment for treating players’ injuries. Trainers’ supplies fill two racquetball courts. Galuski’s crew also helps unload six trucks filled with audio-video equipment and set up two large meeting rooms in the P.E. Building for reviewing videotapes of practice. A dozen golf carts are delivered for toting water and supplies between the practice fields and

Left: Equipment is re-loaded onto trucks for the trip back to the Meadowlands following the conclusion of the 2003 Giants summer camp at UAlbany.

Right: Cynthia Brady, left, director of operations for Student Affairs at UAlbany, coordinates a team of University staffers who work behind the scenes to make the Giants summer training camp run smoothly. From left: Kevin Galuski, equipment manager; Alisa Mathis-Peterson, food service; Jason Benitez, Freedom Quadrangle apartments manager (2003); Christine DeLaMater, coordinator of special events during the Giants’ stay; Shaun Lynch, groundskeeper; and Lt. Aran Mull, security.

Photo: Gary Gold



the RACC. “It’s a lot of heavy lifting and sweaty grunt work, but we get it done,” said Galuski, whose team must hustle to load it back into the trucks, move the staff back into their offices and prepare for the University’s fall sports at the end of August.

He works closely with Tom Hoey, a University data communications analyst who drives a rental truck to the Meadowlands and packs up about 50 laptops, desktops, printers and other computer gear belonging to the Giants. He drives it all back at the end of camp. They use the University’s computer system and a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to send data back and forth to the Meadowlands. A VPN is like a secure pipeline within the Internet, and it also uses encrypted data.

One aspect of Giants training camp that receives rave reviews is the outstanding quality of the natural turf across 15 acres of six practice fields and the game field. That’s because Shaun Lynch, director of athletic grounds, guards the emerald carpet of Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass like a mother hen. He arrives at 5 a.m. and doesn’t leave until after 6 p.m. each

day. He knows every square foot of those 630,000 square feet of playing fields by the end of the summer. Lynch is assisted by a crew of three full-time workers and six students.

Beginning in early spring, they fertilize every four weeks to create a lush, green turf. Instead of a blanket application of herbicides, they opt for an environmentally friendly method of walking the fields and spraying individual weeds and applying grub control only on problem areas. Early each morning, they use a tractor and pull a sled that drags the dew off the fields. They then mow the grass each morning. After each practice, they walk the fields and replace cleat marks and divots by hand and apply new grass seed. Once a week, they re-paint the lines, numbers and hash marks on the fields with water-based paint.

Carol Perrin, associate director of residential life, has been helping the Giants settle in at Freedom Apartments every summer they’ve been at the University. “It’s been such a positive experience for us,” Perrin said. “Every year is a challenge, but it’s gotten easier over time.” The team stays in 70 apartments

throughout three of the four clusters of Freedom. Most have single rooms. Each apartment-style living unit has a kitchen; living room; dining room; full bathroom and 1-, 2-, or 3-bedroom layout.

The top training table in the NFL is found in the Indian Quad dining area under the watchful eye of Alisa Mathis-Peterson, director of operations for Chartwells, the University’s food service. She’s assisted by a dozen food preparers and cooks and 15 waiters and waitresses. The menu is overseen by the Giants’ team nutritionist. “They eat a lot,” she said. The 95 players consume 60 dozen whole eggs and 160 pounds of pasteurized liquid eggs each week. A prime rib dinner for the team amounts to 300 pounds of meat. They devour 20 dozen fresh-baked cookies each day.

Brady, like many other University administrators who help organize the training camp, proudly displays in her office photos and autographs collected during the summer. “Being a Giants fan has made this experience even more exciting, as I have the opportunity to be a part of the team’s preparation,” she says.