

# Where Are They Now • Bill Sparacio '94

## Shaping Lives In Naples

By Jim Leach

In June, when Bill Sparacio '94 became athletic director for First Baptist Academy in Naples, FL, it marked the first time in 29 years that he hasn't been involved with football as a player or coach.

"Football has always been a passion," said Sparacio, who is eighth among Colgate's all-time leading rushers. "As I got into coaching, I saw football as a platform to coach what I love, and to teach. You can develop the character of a young man tremendously through football."

Most recently as the head coach for five years at Naples' Barron Collier High School – ranked by Newsweek as one of the top public high schools in the nation – Sparacio twice led the Cougars into post-season play. Players and opposing coaches alike hail him as a coach and mentor. Raider defensive back Mike Barry '11 (#28), who played for Sparacio at Barron Collier, told the Naples Daily News in April, "He helped me develop a lot as a football player and as a person." [Offensive lineman Rich Rosabella '09 and injured tight end Brendt Dillingham '09 are also Sparacio alumni.]

But when Sparacio's church, the First Baptist Church of Naples, asked him to take on the responsibilities of athletic director for the Academy and help the school grow from K-10 to a full K-12, he saw it as a calling. "It's a great school," he said. "They asked me to launch the program, hiring coaches and building schedules. Now I have the opportunity to use athletics as a platform. We're taking what we have and making it the best we can."

Sparacio was recruited to Colgate out of Centereach High School on Long Island. He entertained scholarship offers from Division I schools as a defensive back, and was also courted by other Patriot League and Ivy League schools. "Mom and Dad liked the academic aspect of Colgate," he said, "and it felt like a good fit. If I wasn't going to play defense at a bigger school, I wanted to be a running back at Colgate. It was a great choice."

Sparacio was one of two freshmen to letter in 1990, finishing that season as the fourth-leading rusher and scoring his first touchdown in a 59-24 win over Cornell. He led the team in rushing the next three years, earning first-team All-Patriot-League honors in each of those years. He rushed for 1,077 yards as a senior to earn the Andy Kerr Trophy as the offensive MVP, finishing his career with 2,799 rushing yards. As a senior he led the Patriot League in all-purpose running (14th nationally in Division I-AA).

Colgate played Rutgers as an early game in three of Sparacio's four seasons. Meeting the Scarlet Knights his senior year in a season-opening game at the Meadowlands – just an hour from home and home field for the NY Giants – is a lasting memory. Sparacio broke a long run to set up a Colgate touchdown that put the Raiders on top 6-0 – only to have Rutgers respond with 68 unanswered points. At a coaching clinic years later, Sparacio

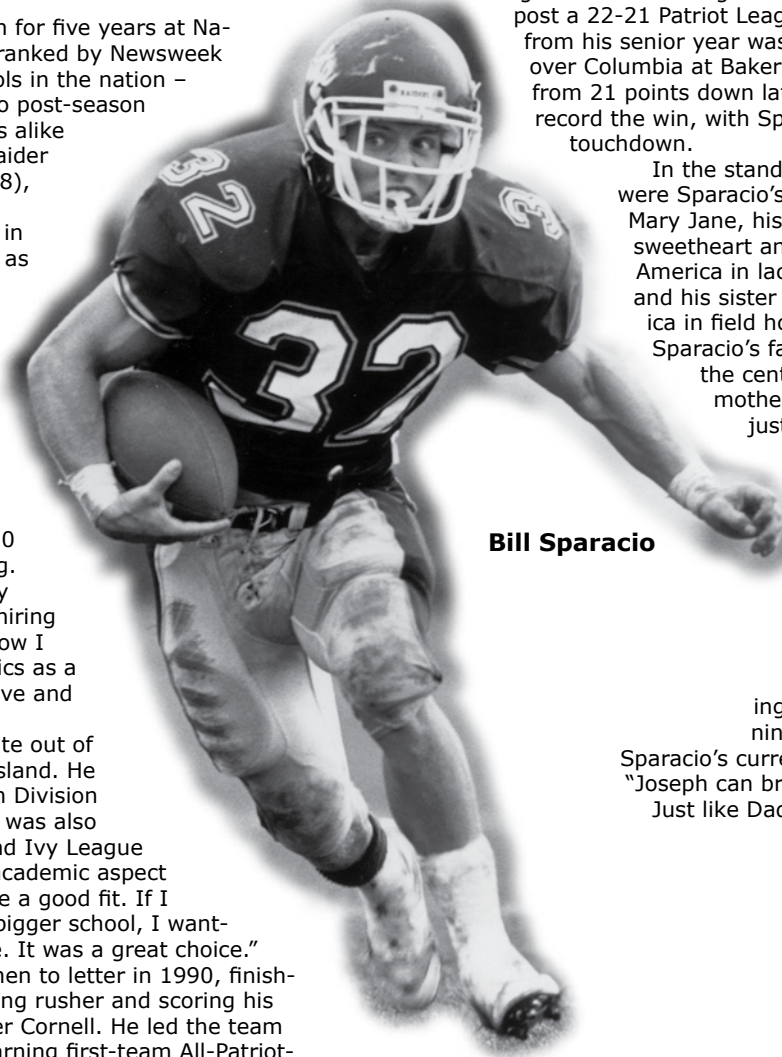
met the defensive back – now a coach at Liberty – who had kept him from scoring.

Whatever the outcome, Sparacio said, "Playing Rutgers was always a special treat." So was traveling to Duke (1991), facing Navy at Annapolis (1993), and Army at Michie Stadium (1991 and 1993): "We played Army during Operation Desert Storm."

As a sophomore, Sparacio recalls the Raiders scoring late in the game against nationally-ranked Lehigh, then holding on in the freezing cold at Andy Kerr Stadium to post a 22-21 Patriot League victory. A highlight from his senior year was the team's 27-24 victory over Columbia at Baker Field. Colgate came back from 21 points down late in the fourth quarter to record the win, with Sparacio scoring the winning touchdown.

In the stands for most of those games were Sparacio's parents, Joseph and Mary Jane, his high school and college sweetheart and now wife Tara (an All-America in lacrosse at Oneonta State), and his sister Jennifer '96 (an All-America in field hockey at Colgate).

Sparacio's family and his faith remain the central themes in his life. His mother and father have moved just three blocks away in Naples. His and Tara's nine-year-old Hannah and eight-year-old Joseph are both students at First Baptist Academy (Samuel will celebrate his first birthday October 19). Joseph, playing above his age as the starting fullback for a team of nine- and ten-year-olds, is Sparacio's current connection to football. "Joseph can bring it," said Bill Sparacio. Just like Dad.



Bill Sparacio