

Where Are They Now • Ryan Vena '00

Still Leading The Offense

By Jim Leach

When Ryan Vena '00 thinks back to what attracted him to Colgate, he's certain on one count: "It wasn't the weather." Fresh from visits to two other I-AA (now FCS) campuses, the star quarterback from Chatfield High School in Littleton, CO, visited Colgate during a blizzard.

"The opportunity to play was really important to me," he remembers, and he saw that in a team with a new head coach, Dick Biddle, picking up the pieces of the previous 0-11 season. As a rookie, Vena quickly established a reputation for making things happen.

"I started out on the third string, running the scout team in practice and I was beating up on the defense. They were telling me not to play so hard. I said, 'I can't stop, I'm trying to make you better, I'm trying to make myself better.'"

Four games into his Colgate career, Vena saw his first game action, coming off the bench in a 38-7 loss at Penn: "My first pass was an interception and I thought for sure I was done." But the Raider coaches saw something in the hard-nosed freshman and announced he would start the following game, against Brown.

Not only did he lead the team to victory over Brown – the Raiders' first victory in 17 starts – he quarterbacked five more consecutive wins to help Biddle's team tie the NCAA record for turnaround seasons. "Once we got a taste of winning, nobody wanted to lose any more."

The team was a two-point conversion shy of the Patriot League championship in a season-ending 28-27 loss at Bucknell that year. Of the decision to go for two points and the win, Vena said, "That's Coach Biddle's mentality and I love it. We literally drew that play up in the dirt. I had a guy wide open in the back of the end zone, but the defender made a great play. I can blink and picture it now."

In his first two seasons at the helm, Biddle had talked former head coach Fred Dunlap into coming out of retirement to coordinate the offense and coach the quarterbacks. Vena recalled: "I learned a ton from him, and later from Coach [Dan] Hunt, they were a huge help in developing my skills and my game. I remember Coach Dunlap always said, 'Take what they give you.' When I started

to play he implemented the old I-formation offense with a lot of options and play action. He'd show me reel-to-reel films of old Colgate games. It worked with the short passing game and a lot of play action and option and we were very successful with it."

So successful, in fact, that the Raiders would go 25-11 over Vena's next three seasons, including 16-2 in the Patriot League to win three league championships and earn automatic berths in the NCAA I-AA playoffs. Vena would

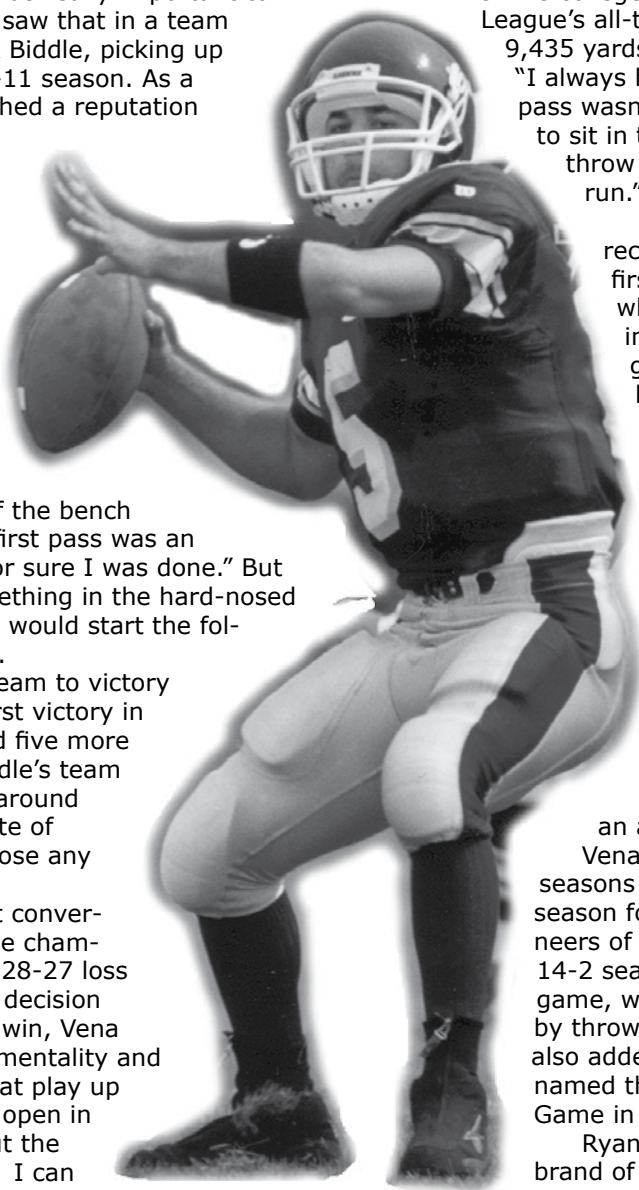
finish his college career as Colgate's and the Patriot League's all-time leader in total offense with 9,435 yards: 7,427 passing and 2,008 rushing.

"I always had that tailback mentality. If the pass wasn't there I wasn't going to be the guy to sit in the pocket all day and take a sack or throw it away. I saw it as an opportunity to run."

While Vena threw to many skilled receivers, his principal target for his first three years was Corey Hill '99, who still holds several Colgate receiving records. Their collaboration at Colgate would lead to them teaming up later to play arena football in Albany (NY) and Columbus (OH). Vena had graduated and was coaching tight ends at Colgate, and Hill was breaking into arena football. When Hill showed college game tapes to a recruiter from Albany, the recruiter also took an interest in Vena. For the next three years, Vena and Hill would make a formidable combination in the arena leagues. Asked recently how many balls he's thrown to Hill over the years, Vena said, "In games and practice, it has to be in the thousands. He's an amazing player and an amazing guy."

Vena has played arena football for six seasons at Albany, Columbus and the past season for the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Pioneers of the af2. He led the Pioneers to a 14-2 season and the league championship game, where he set a new ArenaCup record by throwing seven touchdown passes. He also added one rushing touchdown and was named the Schutt Offensive Player of the Game in a 73-66 loss.

Ryan Vena is still thrilling crowds with his brand of hard-nosed football.



Ryan Vena