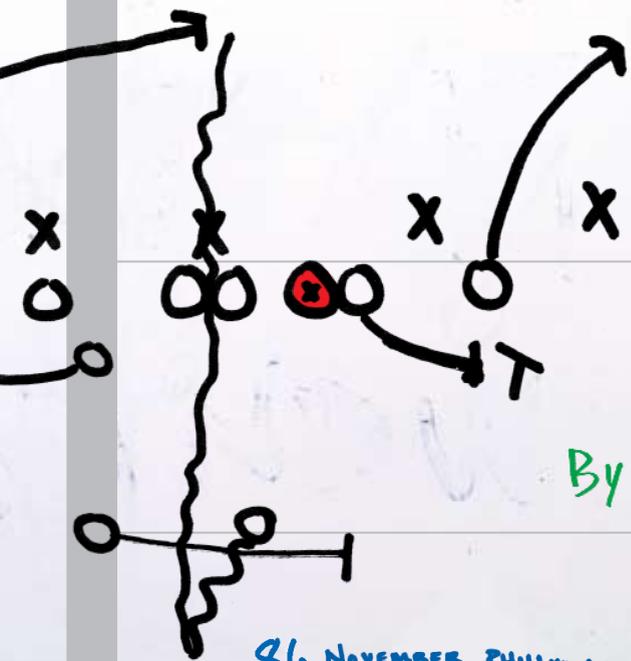


HOW DID THIS GUY TURN THIS GUY INTO PHILLY'S MOST POPULAR PITCHMAN?

In the insular world of
Philadelphia sports teams,
sports bars, sports radio and
sports-obsessed advertisers,
no one stands taller than
Eagles tackle Jon Runyan.
And it's all thanks to a
bald-headed guy with
a BlackBerry

By Don Steinberg

Photograph By Shea Roggio





CUPS RUNNETH OVER

Kaplan (left) has landed Runyan numerous local endorsements, including a high-profile McDonald's commercial.

IT'S A TESTAMENT TO THE DETERMINATION OF JON RUNYAN,

or to whatever else is driving him, that he is here this Tuesday afternoon, in front of a makeup mirror, having his cheeks gently patted with number four powder by makeup artist Mindy Tamaccio.

The Eagles' Monday-night game against the Cowboys ended in Dallas just 17 hours ago, midnight Philadelphia time. It was a slugfest, the highest-scoring game ever in a bitter and ancient rivalry. The Eagles ran 60 plays from scrimmage, almost all of them occasions for Runyan, an offensive tackle, to experience bone-jangling collisions with defensive ends and outside linebackers. Runyan played solidly, but Donovan McNabb was sacked twice during a last-chance drive, and the Eagles lost, 41-37.

A charter got the team back to Philadelphia by five o'clock on Tuesday morning, and by 6:30 Runyan had downed three Tylenol PMs at his house in Mount Laurel to get some sleep for his other job, which is being everywhere that a 330-pound, six-foot-eight professional football player can be in the local media.

Now, on six hours of sleep, saving the full-body hurt for a more convenient time, here he is at the Comcast SportsNet studio inside the Wachovia Center, being made up for his regular gig on *Daily News Live*. "Are you feeling healthy after two games?" host Michael Barkann asks Runyan. "How's the old tailbone? Are you sitting all right?"

"I'm leaning forward right now," Runyan says, and everyone chuckles about the chronic pain.

Next stop—same night—Runyan drives his school-bus-size Chevy pickup to a tavern in Ridley Township called Tom & Jerry's. He sits in a glassed-in booth for the two-hour weekly radio show he does on WIP with Anthony Gargano. Owner Jerry Burns pays the station for the privilege of hosting the broadcast. He won't say how much, other than "It's not free." (His bar



IT'S ALWAYS RUNYAN IN PHILADELPHIA
Scenes from Runyan's McDonald's and Ford ads.

also is the official venue for WIP's Wing Bowl after-party.) On the air, callers wallow in gloom about the Cowboys loss. "I guess I've seen the run fall short so many, so many, so many times," a despondent caller named Jerry moans to Runyan and Gargano, as if he's dialing from the ledge outside his high-rise window.

By eight the next morning, Runyan will start the weekly cycle again at the Eagles' NovaCare Complex training facility, rubbing his eyes to watch films for the coming home game against Pittsburgh, practicing until about six. Then he'll tape a video segment for Fox 29's *Eagles Game Day Live* pre-game show, then attend a board meeting of the local chapter of the Alzheimer's Association.

Somewhere out in TV Land, meanwhile, producers are cueing up one of the regional commercials built around Runyan. Maybe

you've seen the spots for McDonald's coffee: Runyan is in the locker room when a flunky shows up with a cup of java for him. Runyan deems the effort "chest-bump-worthy," and the little dude bounces off Runyan the way you might bounce off a Buick. Maybe you've seen Runyan's sepia-toned commercials for Ford pickup trucks, in which he rams himself into a blockingsled in a dusty rock quarry, or pulls a rope in a tug-of-war against an F-150. You may have filed away, in a special part of your cranium, Runyan's TV commercials for Lee's Hoagie House (the local chain created a sandwich called the Runyan), or the billboard for a New Jersey Harley-Davidson dealer that featured the Eagles lineman with the slogan "Get Your Motor Runyan." Careful Runyanologists might even have noticed the big man's little scene in the sitcom *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* in late September.

MCDONALD'S AD: COURTESY OF MCDONALD'S; FORD BILLBOARD: COURTESY OF FORD MOTOR CO.

Standing just off-camera for the Runyaning of Philadelphia, making it happen, is a thin man with a shaved head and a BlackBerry.

Craig Kaplan is sometimes

called Runyan's agent. But Runyan has a separate player agent, Ben Dogra, who in 2000 convinced the Eagles to give Runyan what was (briefly) the richest contract ever for an offensive lineman: \$30.5 million for six years, plus a \$6 million signing bonus. (They renewed in 2006 for three seasons at a reported \$12.5 million.) Dogra works for CAA Football, a unit of L.A.-based monolith Creative Artists Agency.

Kaplan, in contrast, is a one-man operation out of Bala Cynwyd who works in thousands, not millions. He gets local gigs for local guys in the thriving economy built on the insane passion of radio-show callers like Jerry. It's an interconnected tapestry of sports radio and cable TV, pre-game shows and post-game parties, crab fries and Wing

channel our dreams. You might say we're no different from New York or Los Angeles or D.C.—but then, of course, you'd just be wrong. Those cities' hearts beat around things that have nothing to do with sports. And they have real celebrities. You could say we're most like Boston or Detroit or Chicago—except their sports economies don't include the governor of the state showing up to do football post-game analysis at the local cable sports network, which is owned by the biggest media company in town, which also owns the hockey and basketball teams.

Kaplan, 46, knows the territory, and in a culture bred on moderate expectations, he has built a small empire. He was raised in Bala Cynwyd and graduated from Lower Merion High in 1980. Went to (but didn't graduate from) Charles Morris Price School of Advertising & Journalism. Kaplan isn't a natural extrovert. He'll tell you how many Eagles' cell-phone numbers he has, and he makes sure the newspapers know whenever he gets an athlete a deal, but he's a Philly



Bowls, personal appearances and charity golf events and car dealers and bar owners and restaurateurs who understand that bringing in local athletes attracts a crowd, and who, as fans themselves, get to use their marketing budgets to buy themselves a piece of the action.

Philadelphia isn't unique in its insular sports mania; we're just a little extra-psycho-pathic about it. You could argue Philly isn't so different from Pittsburgh or Cleveland or Green Bay—except we do have teams in all four major-league sports pumping out pieces of our shared heritage and athletes through whom we can

guy, subdued, muffled. He works hard to be this pesky.

In the late 1980s he was selling ads for Comcast cable when a marketing manager for a phone company said he'd buy some local spots if Kaplan could get Eagles running back Keith Byars to appear in them. Byars had played for Ohio State, the phone guy's alma mater, and that's what mattered. Kaplan hadn't worked with athletes, but he wrote a proposal, lurked at the Eagles' practice field near the Vet, and presented the deal to Byars, who said yes.

He built from there—more gigs for Eagles, Phillies, 76ers, Flyers. In 1994,

TOUGH SELLS

How do today's endorsement deals stack up against the old days? Three members of the Eagles' 1960 championship team remember all the money they didn't make.



TOMMY McDONALD
WIDE RECEIVER
AGE - 74

"I was working for Phillies Cigars, doing appearances and signing autographs, and they starting putting out ads with me, so I kind of stumbled into it. ... I signed with the Eagles for \$12,000 per year, plus a \$1,000 signing bonus. Salaries were so low, you had to work in the off-season to make any money at all. Plus, I used to go work after practice."



TOM BROOKSHIER
CORNERBACK
AGE - 76

"Back then, Blue Cross wasn't a huge company yet, so I used to go out and give talks for the local Blue Cross guy. He paid me 25 bucks—and I had to take my own car."



CHUCK BEDNARIK
CENTER/LINEBACKER
AGE - 83

"Emma?" [to his wife] "Did I have any endorsements when I played football? Just Chesterfield. Their slogan was 'Open 'em. Smell 'em. Smoke 'em.' ... I made about \$1,000. And in those days, a thousand bucks was a lot of money. ... Today? I'd endorse beer. I'd endorse wine. I drink either chianti or zinfandel. In fact, I just finished a glass of chianti." [It's not quite noon on a Tuesday.]

Runyan

Kaplan launched his own company, All Star Promotion. He got Eagles kicker David Akers his first endorsement, for restaurant/store/inn Doneckers in Ephrata. "I worked with Larry Bowa, Bill Bergey, did some stuff with Randall Cunningham. Got Brian Dawkins's first deal, got Charlie Garner his first deal," Kaplan says. "With Lenny Dykstra, I met the PR firm for Nicorette/Nicoderm at one of the Super Bowls, and they were looking for an athlete who had just quit smoking. Lenny was perfect. He had been chewing." Kaplan won Irving Fryar a role in the movie *Any Given Sunday*. He got Eagles linebacker Omar Gaither a gig on Channel 6's *Football Frenzy* and an endorsement deal with Woodbury Nissan.

Kaplan gets 20 percent of clients' fees. Athletes may get a few thousand dollars for an appearance, maybe five figures for an endorsement. That's lunch money for a pro athlete whose weekly pay looks like an Internet IP address. But plenty of players look for gigs between games. Many work cheap to get experience in broadcasting. A lot of them want Kaplan's help in promoting charitable causes.

And they love free cars and trucks. Early on, Kaplan became the guy who could put an athlete in a new vehicle for plugging a local dealer. It makes no sense, he admits. Leasing a Bentley for many of these guys would be the equivalent, for a normal person, of signing up for Netflix. But players get special locker-room points when they roll up to practice in a killer ride they got for free just for being the studs they are.

"When [Flyers defenseman] Paul Coffey came to town, he said, 'I heard you do this—I could really use a car,'" Kaplan says. "Okay, boom. I make a call, and now he's got a car, so he's happy." Coffey did a commercial in which a Jeep dealer, starring as himself, yelled to his secretary, "Get me coffee!" and Coffey walked in wearing his uniform. (Kaplan wrote the script.)

Gaither says his entire compensation for his recent dealer endorsement was a Nissan Armada. Where's Kaplan's 20 percent in that?

"I let him drive sometimes," Gaither says.

Kaplan met Runyan after having his young son offer Runyan's son cookies in the stands at an Eagles pre-season game

in 2000, the year the Runyans arrived in town. He introduced himself to Runyan's wife, Loretta, and it wasn't long before he hooked the big guy up with a Chevy. When it turned out Runyan needed treatment for sleep apnea, Kaplan inked a deal with a Main Line oral surgeon who did the procedure in exchange for a plug. "I'm the reason Jon doesn't have a uvula," Kaplan says. After that, there was no stopping them. The football player and the marketing man developed a symbiotic relationship, like the sea turtles that guide the great whales through the ocean.

"He's always, like, 'If there's anything you want, I can go out and get a deal for it,'" Runyan says of Kaplan.

Occasionally, they practice together. When Kaplan got Runyan a short-lived gig doing color commentary (for free) for NFL Europa games (the league has been disbanded), Runyan brought DVDs of Eagles games to Kaplan's house, and they pretended to be broadcasters.

In 2004, the Runyans decided they'd settle in the area rather than move back to Loretta's native Houston. They started building a giant home in Mount Laurel (it's almost finished), and Runyan felt a new fire to develop off-field gigs toward a post-playing future. He isn't planning to retire right away, but you sense a quiet urgency driving him from one media job to the next. He'll be a free agent in 2009, and 35 years old. NFL teams aren't sentimental about roster choices, even when a guy hasn't missed a regular-season game in more than 11 years.

"You never know when it's gonna end," he says, as he kills 30 minutes in the Wachovia Center parking lot between his TV and radio shows. "I've been thinking about it for a while."

Life after the game is an abyss that so many active players avoid peering into. The NFL offers them seminars about the tough transition: You'll need to downsize your life. The divorce rate soars. Active players hear stories about former players. "You only hear the bad ones," Runyan says.

Runyan grew up in Flint, Michigan, where his family was "middle-class, most of the time," he says. His father was laid off from the GM plant when he was young, and they went on food stamps. Runyan's Ford commercial didn't bother his dad—"It's all union," Jon says. "But I was embarrassed the first time I went home with a BMW."

It may be hard to imagine now, but at first Runyan wasn't an easy sell to the media or sponsors. They said things like

"Isn't McNabb available?" or "Jon who?" In fact, Kaplan was turned down by every radio station until he sold the now-defunct Y100 on a show called *Rockin' With Runyan* in 2004. Really, it was a package deal, with Runyan wrapped in a bow. Kaplan had *Rockin' With Runyan* t-shirts made, for sale at Modell's. He delivered sponsors such as Iron Hill Brewery in Media, where Runyan would go after every show to help sell a special brew called Runyan's Reserve. A dollar from every beer sale went to a cystic fibrosis charity. Runyan got about 20 grand for the season of radio work.

He progressed from Y100 to WXTU and, last year, WIP. His TV work started with short "Runyan Report" segments on CN8. A year later, Comcast SportsNet, which had turned him down, gave him a regular gig.

He's getting good at it. He knows the X's and O's of football, of course. He's poised on-camera, with a voice that soothes as he tells radio listeners everything's going to be okay. "He's learned the most important thing—how to be himself," says WIP program director Andy Bloom. And he's funny. Asked on the air about DeShaun Jackson's goof in the Dallas game, in which the rookie receiver released the ball to celebrate a touchdown before actually entering the end zone, Runyan said, "It's a pretty simple concept: Spike it in the paint."

Runyan's TV commercials have been less about his insight than his magnitude. "Big Jon Runyan," says Kaplan. "Kind of like the—what is it? Paul Bunyan?" Runyan ran into a regional marketing manager for McDonald's at former Phillie Garry Maddox's charity bowling tournament, and Kaplan followed up fiercely. *A large coffee for 69 cents? Jon is large, and he's number 69!* The Ford deal in which Runyan battles a truck, well, there was a regional Ford guy whose kids went to the same private school as Runyan's, and the guy had sponsored Runyan's charity golf tournament, and Kaplan rammed another gig over the goal line.

All of it is designed for the day when Runyan puts together a highlight tape and sends it off to ESPN or Fox.

"Yeah. That's the idea," he says, looking out across the empty Wachovia Center parking lot. "We'll see how it goes."

Runyan's week following the Sunday home win over the Steelers was a little less insane than the Cowboys aftermath. Right after the game, he parked his pickup in the

back corner of the players' lot behind the Linc and, as usual, broke out beers and pizza for about a dozen friends, including Kaplan and Jerry D'Addesi, who co-owns the Queen Village restaurant Vesuvio. About four years ago, D'Addesi hired Runyan to show up for after-radio-show parties. Now they're just buddies, and Vesuvio hosts WIP's official Eagles Sunday post-game radio show with Gargano.

By 11 on Tuesday morning, local athletes and golfers started arriving at Ramblewood Country Club in Mount Laurel for the fourth annual Jon Runyan Score for the Cure golf tournament, set up by Kaplan, of course. The event broke its record by raising more than \$125,000 for prostate cancer research.

It was a pristine day—72 degrees, a tickling breeze. Runyan was there early—it's five minutes from his house, and he's a member—wearing boat-size Crocs with Eagles logos on them. He posed for photos and greeted businessmen in the registration tent while he zigzagged a Sharpie marker over dozens of footballs and placards that would be given to event sponsors. Terry Harmon, a Phillies second baseman in the '70s, autographed at a nearby table, as did Bernie Parent, the former Flyers goalie. Todd MacCulloch, the former 76ers center and current broadcaster, arrived, and Beasley Reece, a former NFL defensive back and now sports anchor on CBS-3, came in to ask MacCulloch for a brief interview about the Sixers. There was Mike Quick, the former Eagles receiver who does the team's games on WYSP, and current Eagles Gaither, Chris Gocong, Sean Considine, Hank Bassett and Todd Herremans.

Kaplan ran around with a clipboard, matching celebrities with sponsors in four-somes the way a bride masterminds seating for a wedding reception. He paired Gocong with a bigwig from ShopRite who at an earlier charity event had introduced Kaplan to a Pepsi executive. You never know.

A 50-ish corporate guy approached Runyan and said he was a cancer survivor—and asked him to autograph two Eagles mini-helmets. Runyan could have signed things all day.

"It's part of what I do now," he says. "They always talk about creating a brand, you know? I'm my own brand, and that's the thing about brand recognition: being recognizable to everybody." 

Yardley-based writer Don Steinberg has an essay in the *New Yorker* humor anthology *Disquiet Please*, out this month. E-MAIL: mail@phillymag.com



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