

IN PERSON

The Possible Dream

A Gutsy Football Player's Persistence Inspires a Movie

By ROBERT STRAUSS

MARLTON

VINCE PAPALE sits comfortably in Champps, a typical sports bar with loud, throbbing music, toothy waitresses and food portions clearly not designed for the Jenny Craig set.

All around the large dining room are photographs of professional athletes who not only have lived the dream but are also the inspiration for the sons and daughters of those who stop by for a beer at places like these.

Most days, Mr. Papale (pronounced pah-PAH-lee) talks to young people about having a dream — maybe not the dream of being a pro athlete, but a vibrant dream nonetheless. He works in the Cherry Hill office of the SLM Corporation, the student-loan provider known as Sallie Mae. His counseling job often involves persuading marginal students to try to earn a degree.

By next fall, many more of those students and their families will know more about Mr. Papale, who beat seemingly insurmountable odds and at age 30 became a rookie for the Philadelphia Eagles in 1976 — a tale that will be told in a Disney film called "Invincible," starring Mark Wahlberg as Mr. Papale and Greg Kinnear as his Eagles coach, Dick Vermeil.

"It's all good," said Mr. Papale, knifing through a chicken-and-pasta dish like a would-be tackler shedding blockers. "There is nothing that isn't good about this. It's a resurrection of a 30-year-old story, and now I can share it with a new generation. It's a wonderful thing."

Mr. Papale's story begins in the late 1960's when he was a track star at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia and then went on to teach in the suburbs. In his free time, he played in "rough touch" football leagues — seven-on-seven games where everyone was eligible to catch a pass and most of the touches were more like pokes and punches. In time, he graduated to semipro games and, finally, to the upstart World Football League.

When that league failed after little more than a year, the 30-year-old Mr. Papale — who had never played football in college — managed to get a tryout with the Philadelphia Eagles, at the time the doormat of the National Football League. In 1976, the owner, Leonard Tose, brought in Mr. Vermeil,



Norman Y. Lono for The New York Times

Vince Papale, Janet Cantwell-Papale and their children, Vincent, 9, and Gabriella, 11.

who had enjoyed some success as a coach at U.C.L.A. by being the proverbial tough guy with a heart of gold. He was known to love hard workers, and he found there was no one who worked harder than Mr. Papale.

"The team hadn't had a winning season for a decade," said Ray Didinger, who today is a producer at NFL Films but at the time covered the Eagles for The Bulletin in Philadelphia. "They were not just losing — they

had lost the will to win. So when Vermeil came in, his feeling was, 'If we want to turn this around, we have to turn around the attitude.' At the beginning of training camp, he told everyone that it would be the hardest one they ever had and he would go into the season with maybe not the best players, but the ones who proved it was important to be there."

Mr. Papale reveled in the two practices a

day and the searing summer heat. "It was like Quantico," Mr. Didinger said. "He started out with 120 players, and every day you would just see someone flip their suitcases into a car and leave. But not Vince. He wasn't leaving under any circumstances."

At the same time, Mr. Papale's father, whose preferred nickname was Kingey, was on strike from his job at the Westinghouse factory in Essington, Pa., just outside of Philadelphia. He and his co-workers would often show up at training camp at Widener College, just a few miles down the road, in Chester.

"Every time I would catch a ball in practice, they would yell, 'We want Vince, We want Vince,' and Coach Vermeil would look around and see me with the ball in my hands," Mr. Papale said. "This was before fans came to training camps, so it helped the legend grow."

Soon enough, the day came for the final cuts, and as he was warming up, Mr. Papale saw Mr. Vermeil come toward him.

"I was as nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs," Mr. Papale said. "I thought, 'Oh, oh, I'm cut.' He comes over to me and says: 'Congratulations, old man. You're an Eagle.'"

The only thing Mr. Papale could think of was to ask if he could use the pay phone by the field. He called his father and after telling him the news, he said, "all I could hear was the guys at the plant cheering — it was like in the movies."

Now comes the real movie, which was inspired by a piece in 2002 about Mr. Papale that NFL Films produced for "Monday Night Football" in honor of the 25th anniversary of "Rocky." It chronicled Mr. Papale's rise and three-year career as a special teams "gunner," the guy whose job it is to speed down the field, encountering the first wave of blockers, to get to the kickoff or punt returner first.

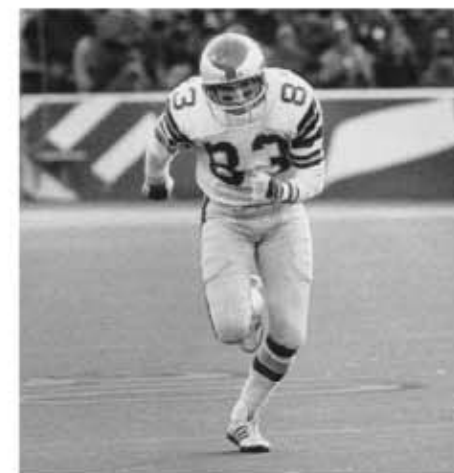
Gordon Gray and Mark Ciardi — who had produced "Miracle" (about the 1980 United States Olympic ice hockey team) and "The Rookie" (about an older guy making it in professional baseball) — won the rights and aligned themselves with Disney.

To them, it is the perfect feel-good story for a cynical age.

"Look, Lance Armstrong is a great story, but it's too present," Mr. Gray said in a telephone interview from his office in Hollywood. "Everyone feels they know Lance Armstrong. But to take a story of someone not many people have heard of, say that it is based on a true story, and show individual triumph, that is something wonderful."

Mr. Papale first came to New Jersey when he tried out for the Philadelphia Bell in the World Football League, surviving an open tryout of 600 hopefuls in Cherry Hill. He and the two other recruits found an apartment in Mount Laurel, and the night they moved in, they went to a party in their development.

"There were Bobby Clarke and Dave Schultz and Rick MacLeish, my favorite Flyers," he said, referring to Philadelphia's



Chuck Zovko for The New York Times

Vince Papale at the Eagles training camp at Widener College in 1979, when he was cut because of an arm injury.

hockey team. "I was a huge hockey fan. If Jersey was good enough for them, it was good enough for me. I've been here 30 years now and don't intend to move."

After his brief football career, Mr. Papale worked as a sportscaster for WCAU-TV in Philadelphia, at that time the local CBS affiliate, and then settled into being a loan officer, eventually with Sallie Mae. He and Janet Cantwell-Papale, a former gymnastics coach at the University of Pennsylvania, married 13 years ago, and they have an 11-year-old daughter and a 9-year-old son.

Though he is a robust 59, Mr. Papale said that outside of the machines at his home gym, "the closest I get to contact these days is as coach at the Cherry Hill Pee Wee League."

He survived a bout with colorectal cancer five years ago. "Every day is a blessing," he said, ratcheting down his usual peppy tone for a moment. "It is what makes all this the sweeter."

Mr. Papale, who has a bit part in the film as an assistant coach with the Eagles, intends to stay with Sallie Mae and continue his motivational speaking.

"I hope the movie gets me to connect with the kids more," he said. "They will know that this guy up there in a suit — the one about whom they say, 'Oh, this guy couldn't possibly have played pro football' — really had the goods. The movie will have a life, but then that will be over. Then I will be able to tell kids: 'Look, every one of you has a possibility to become great. Prepare yourself for it. There is no failure in trying and not achieving. The failure is in not giving it your best shot. The victory is in participating.'"

"I didn't become a great star," said Mr. Papale, who caught only one pass in his three years as an Eagle, though he was a special teams player the whole time. "But I was a shy guy with a dream and determination and, heck, there is going to be a movie about me."