

Rozier recovering from wounds

Police uncertain about gunman, facts surrounding night of shooting

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South Jersey rival of Rozier in high school and a teammate at Nebraska. Fryar overcame some problems in his own life, recently became a minister and has visited Rozier several times since the shooting.

"Mike's a good guy who has good morals," Fryar said. "His mother and father raised him right. I know Mike is where he is because he wants to be home, be around his family, the neighborhood, his old friends, and you can't blame him for that."

One of the first people to call Rozier in the hospital the day after the shooting was Nebraska Coach Tom Osborne, who guided Rozier through his years with the Cornhuskers and has stayed close to him.

"I love Coach Osborne," Rozier said. "If he had a kidney problem and wanted a kidney, I'd give him mine. That's how much I think of him."

Rozier, though bandaged and in pain, looks only slightly softer than the days when he ran, as a 5-10, 198-pounder senior, for a Nebraska-record 2,148 yards — which currently ranks third in NCAA history behind Barry Sanders' 2,628 in for Oklahoma State in 1988 and Marcus Allen's 2,342 for Southern Cal in 1981 — and scored a then-NCAA record 29 touchdowns. That ranks second all-time behind Sanders' 37.

Rozier never let his Heisman status change him or distance him from his old friends, and he still plans to show up for the Heisman announcement Dec. 14 at the Downtown Athletic Club in New York.

The trophy and his talent brought him a \$3 million contract as the No. 1 draft choice of Pittsburgh in the USFL in 1984, \$200,000 the following year with Jacksonville of the same league, and a four-year deal reportedly worth \$1.4 million with Houston in the NFL later in 1985. Placed on waivers by the Oilers in 1990, he finished his career after three seasons with Atlanta, quitting in part because of a knee injury and in part because he lost interest in football.

In seven NFL seasons, Rozier had modest success with 1,159 carries for 4,462 yards and 30 touchdowns. He also caught 90 passes for 715 yards.

The story of the fast, wild shooting two weeks ago makes no more sense than many of the 27 homicides in Camden so far this year, a statistic the police boast is about half of last year's total.

Rozier and Merrill, the way they tell it, were driving around in Rozier's red 1989 Mercedes, a car virtually everyone in Camden knows. Red chrome, red carpeting, every inch meticulously maintained.

First they stop to see some friends, then they go to a little store that one of Rozier's six brothers opened. It's late, and Rozier is there to make sure nobody messes with his brother when he picks up the money. Then they drive around a little more and see a couple of guys they know, who holler for them to pull over and talk.

"I pull over, no problem," Rozier said. "I do that all the time."

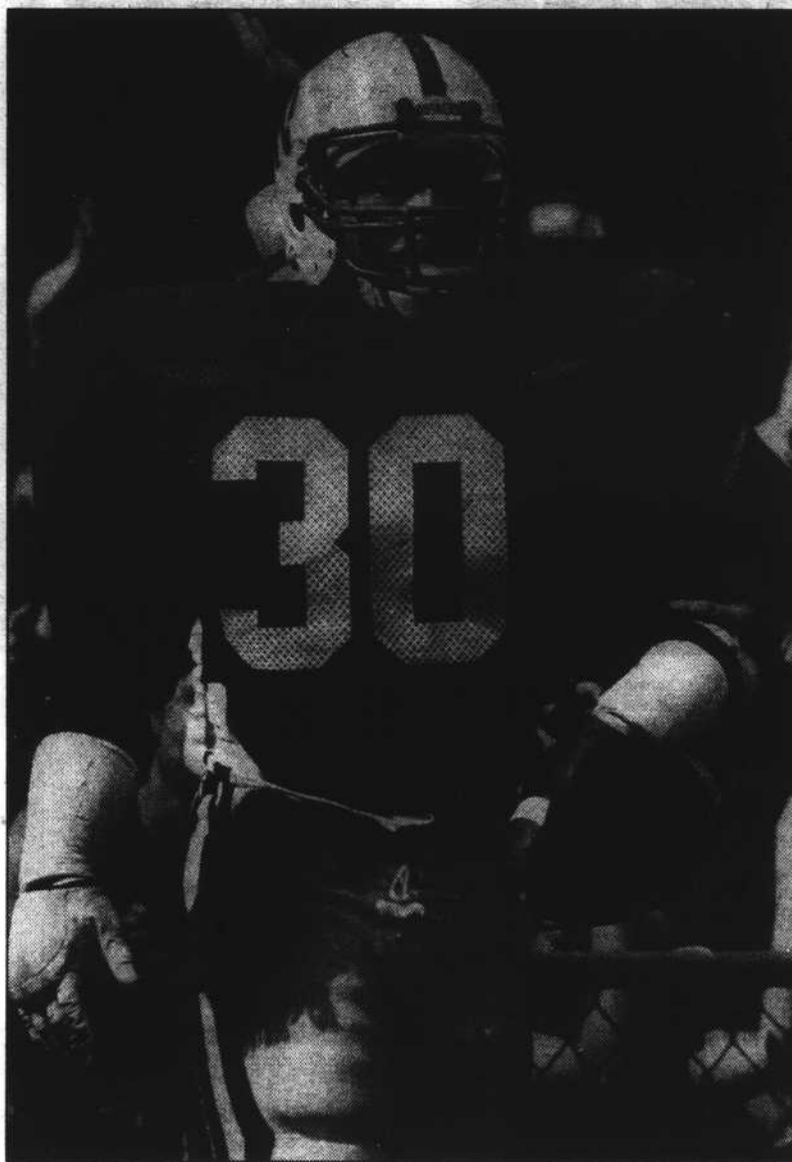
Soon, a man they know from the neighborhood, but identified to police only as "Lou," comes along acting drunk and obnoxious.

"He was drunk. He was in my face," Rozier said. "I know him, and I know how he is. It wasn't like he was trying to threaten me. Bart was just saying to back off."

Rozier and Merrill think the situation is over, but about 30 minutes later Lou returns — with a gun under his coat.

"He never said anything. He probably was too drunk to say anything," Merrill said. "He didn't walk up to Mike. He walked up behind me. Then after he shot me in the back, Mike, being my friend and everything, he thought he'd better try and shoot Mike."

The story Rozier and Merrill tell sound unconvincing to the police, who



DN FILE PHOTO

FORMER NU running back Mike Rozier celebrates one of his 52 career touchdowns for the Cornhuskers.

are still investigating the case.

"They said this guy just pulled out a gun for no apparent reason," Lt. Joe Richardson said. "I mean, if you and I are drinking, I don't just pull out a gun for no apparent reason and shoot you three times or four times. There's usually a reason."

Richardson is also suspicious of Rozier's and Merrill's "limited cooperation" with officers investigating the shooting.

"I think Bart wants to get the guy that shot him, and shoot him himself," Richardson said.

"Well, put it like this," Merrill said in response to police worries of retaliation. "I'm not out to shoot nobody myself because I got daughters to raise and this guy's not worth me leaving my children. I'm a very well respected guy with a lot of brothers, and that's because I'm straight up."

There's also a different version of what happened, according to Martin Sartin, who grew up admiring Rozier, played running back at Long Beach State and had a brief NFL career with the Los Angeles Raiders and San Diego Chargers.

"Mike was a role model for me," said Sartin, now a middle school teacher and family service counselor.

"I have mixed feelings about him at this point. Instead of turning to the people who could help him, he turned to the streets and the corruption of it, from drugs to drinking to poor selection of friends."

Sartin, however, admits he never saw Rozier buy drugs or use drugs. No drugs were found at the site of the shooting. Nor has Rozier ever been arrested for buying or using drugs, though he acknowledges trying various drugs while playing in the pros.

"I tried cocaine before, smoked weed before," Rozier said. "There's nothing out there that I don't know the effect of."

Rozier says he dealt with all that and put it behind him, voluntarily going for alcohol counseling when he played for Houston and rehabilitation for drugs another time as a pro.

He shrugs off Sartin's comments and similar rumors as nothing more than fantasies rooted in jealousy and

ignorance.

"Whether you're going good or bad, people want to think bad things about you," Rozier said, his tone less bitter than wearily resigned. "It makes no difference what they think about me. I know what I'm doing, and people with me know what I'm doing."

"I take care of my responsibilities, take care of my kids, take care of Mom and Dad."

"I don't have any cash flow like I had before, but I ain't broke, and I ain't poor and I ain't homeless."

Rozier, who has never been married but has two 7-year-olds in Texas, said the shooting has given him a new urgency about life and deepened his religious beliefs.

Perhaps strangely for a man who once was the best running back in college, he has no interest in coaching, going to games or even watching them on television.

"To be honest with you, I never wanted to play football," he said. "I wanted to be a trash man. Carry trash. When I was young they weren't making much money. They're making good money now. I still want to be a trash man. People say it's not safe. I wouldn't mind it. I'm not scared to work. I did hard work all my life. Yard work, construction, I did it all."

For all his apathy toward football, Rozier doesn't diminish the significance of the trophy in his life. Nor does he shy away from the award ceremony, though he showed up at the black-tie affair a couple of years ago in a leather jacket and stretched out on his back near the bar.

"It's an elite club that got the Heisman," Rozier said. "I feel proud to be a part of that club because there's some great guys up there with me. I've been to the last three and I'm going this year. Why not? I'll be healthy. They'll send a limousine. I'll sit in the backseat. No problem."

By that time, the cast on his right hand should be off, the staples in his belly gone. He likes to move around, go where he wants, when he wants. Up to New York, out to Nebraska, down to Dallas, Houston or Atlanta.

But nowhere for too long, and always right back to Camden.

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