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When Rudy Ran Toward the Wrong Goal

Ken Briggs | Nov. 29, 2012 NCR Today

As pumped up Notre Dame fans boast their way toward the January 7 national championship bash, they might take a moment to remember Rudy.

Yes, that Rudy of movie fame, whose against-all-odds grittiness reinvigorated the school's football legends. As reported in mid December last year, Daniel "Rudy" Ruettinger, the real life version, had agreed to shell out $380,000 to settle stock swindling charges brought by the Securities and Exchange Commission. We have become to this kind of plea bargain: the indicted consents to the penalty but never has to plead guilty to the crime. He was cited as the ringleader a scheme that included others. No way he had to admit that either.

Rudy had become a cult figure in that segment of America that loves the underdog, especially the athletes, who never quit and are granted his moment in the sun by those deemed capable of turning it all into mythological victory. The lesson: striving is everything, anyone with the drive and determination can make it. It's a story we still live by to an astonishing degree despite so much evidence to the contrary.

But Ruettinger was a real live example of the sudden rise from obscurity, and the aftermath points to another familiar American tale, the perils of fame and fortune. He became the symbol of never-say-die, a sign that it could happen to anyone. He became a sought-after word of inspiration at dinners honors high school and college athletes and a host of other public functions. He gained a place at the table of uncomplicated hope. As you'd expect, he did right well financially, too, according to the reports, and ventured into business initiatives including the bottling of a sports drink called "Rudy Nutrition" which the business partners saw as a rival to Gatorade and Powerade. On the container were the slogans, "Dream Big" and "Never Quit." In their efforts to whip up investor support, their ads claimed that their drink had won a blind taste test against Gatorade and Powerade by a two to one margin. Another said, falsely, that the Rudy brew was consumed twice as often as Gatorade among customers in the Southwest, where 120 degree temperatures make choices especially meaningful. They sold lots o shares but put only part of it back into the drink.

Drawing on evidence of this kind, the SEC inidcted Rudy and his cohorts earlier in 2011 for running a Ponzi scheme.

As John F. Kennedy Jr. reminded us (and I paraphrase), success has a thousand parents while failure is an orphan. But when success succumbs to its constant companions, greed and pride, the "Rudy" example exposes again the fraud underlying the myth.

It may even be a cautionary tale for the Irish who are Fighting.

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