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Shane Conlan Is A Current Attraction

FREWSBURG. SAY IT AGAIN. Frewsburg. It has a wholesome, gutsy bite to it, like corn on the cob and homemade apple pie.

Frewsburg, neat, clean, and green, is a blue-collar village of 1908 inhabitants nestled among vineyards and cornfields in western New York, near the Pennsylvania border. It was name, a local resident says, "by some Scotsman who got lost."

A lot of the people work at the Ethan Allen Furniture Factory or the Vac Air Alloys plant on the opposite sides of town, or in the much larger town of Jamestown a couple of miles up the river.

It's something like that little town out West that was settled by sod busters who had to fight off the cowmen to survive, with the help of a tough, quiet, good-hearted gunfighter: Alan Ladd in "Shane."

"That's my husband's favorite movie," Kay Conlan says as she stocks the sundry shelves in Quality Market where she works. "I didn't even know that until Shane was born."

If Shane Conlan would let them, Frewsburg residents would probably change the name of their town in honor of the young favorite son who is a starting linebacker for the Buffalo Bills.

But, heck, he won't even let them put a little bitty sign up there on the "Welcome to Frewsburg" marquee coming into town that lists all the local churches and service clubs. It would say, "Hometown of Shane Conlan."

Too bad, because it might be an inspiration for a lot of small-town kids who feel so forlorn among the back roads of America—also for a lot of big-town kids lost in the darkness of drugs and misdirected.

Conlan's father, Dan, an investigator for the New York State Police, was inspired when he named his middle son. Shane turned out a lot like Dan's movie hero, knowing right from wrong and what to do about it.

Get this.

While attending high school, Conlan worked in a program called “The Second Mile” for special children—no, *worked* is the wrong word, the way Conlan tells it. “I was just friends to them,” he says. “They get picked on and that makes me sick to my stomach. I might have helped some of them socially to be accepted.”

At Penn State, head coach Joe Paterno called him the best linebacker ever at a school noted for great linebackers. He was an All-American and, with two interceptions in spite of a bad knee, led the Nittany Lion defense that upset Vinny Testaverde and Miami for the national title in the '87 Fiesta Bowl.

He graduated with a degree in administration of justice, but at Penn State that's not unusual. How many of Penn State's senior graduated after the '86 season? “Probably 27,” Conlan says. “Every one of em.”

Finally, Conlan was drafted on the first-round by the Bills, the eighth player taken overall, and he didn't find it unusual to be one of the few first-rounders sincerely pleased to be claimed by the Bills.

“I'm happy to be there,” Conlan says. “It's close to my house. I watched 'em when I was growing up. The location's perfect. All my friends and family are here.”

FOR THE OPENING GAME ABOUT six busloads of the above made the one hour 20 minute trip up to Orchard Park, N.Y., to see the Bills play the division rival New York Jets.

One bus came Charlie Gallagher's Frewsburg Hotel and Restaurant because, Gallagher noted, Conlan “has turned this town around. They all used to be Pittsburgh Steeler fans.”

Rosann Paul has been a waitress at the Frewsburg since Conlan worked there while in high school.

“He cleaned up and fried fish,” Paul said. “When he comes home now he's always at the ball fields with the kids. He hasn't changed at all.”

Sue Johnson, another waitress, remembers him, too.

“He couldn't walk across the floor without tripping and falling,” she said.

At the Frewsburg Pharmacy, Sue Richards said she's known Conlan “since two years old. He was always a real good athlete and a good kid.

Co-worker Nancy Wilson said: “When Shane comes in here he almost reaches the ceiling, but he'll talk to you.”

A block down the street at the Frewsburger Restaurant, Tom Dallas is polishing off a chocolate sundae. He played high school football with Conlan for the Frewsburg Central Bears.

“He was good,” Dallas said, then added, “For around here, he was awful good. He was fast. He only weighed about 180 pounds in high school, but that’s good size around here.”

Later, Conlan grew to 6-3 and 230 pounds.

One year the Bears were undefeated when they went to play Albion in the Section 6 Football Federation playoffs in Rich Stadium, the Bills’ home. They lost 49-14, but “to me, it was a once-in-a-lifetime thing,” Dallas said.

Dallas’ older sister Suzette, a waitress at the Frewsburger, wasn’t nearly as impressed with Conlan.

“He was littler than me,” she sniffed. “I didn’t pay attention to him.”

It's not easy to get into trouble in Frewsburg, even if a kid wanted to. Besides hanging out at the ice cream shop, there isn't a whole lot of action.

So what do Frewsburg kids do for fun?

“Go to Jamestown,” Conlan said. “But I was involved in sports. That’s all I did when I was young.”

Jamestown is better known and Frewsburg is, well, kind of a funny name. But when Conlan introduced himself to his Penn State teammates in his freshman year, he said he was from Frewsburg.

“I could have said I was from Jamestown or Buffalo,” he said. “I said Frewsburg. They just laughed.”

They aren’t laughing anymore.

THE CONLAN’S HAVE LIVED IN Frewsburg for 21 years, since Shane was two. There is a married sister, Kelly, who has two children; an older brother, Kevin, and a younger brother Mike, who plays at Rutgers.

When Conlan signed a four year contract worth in the neighborhood of \$1 million, his first thoughts were to do something for his family.

His mother, Kay, said: “There’s one thing I had asked, if he was successful. My oldest son (Kevin) had a fairly large student loan. It’s been taken care of now.

Kevin, a year older, also had a promising collegiate career until suffering a knee injury in his freshman year, although he returned to play at Edinboro University.

“Shane talked about a new home for us for years, Kay said, “but I want to get him settled first.”

The contrast in values with another famous linebacker is striking. A visitor wonders aloud how Brian Bosworth of the Seattle Seahawks would fit in at Frewsburg, swaggering down the main street with a Technicolor punk haircut and an earring in his ear.

“Not at all,” Kay said, “These are very down-to-earth, common-sense, sensible people here – and Shane would hate me saying that.”

Said Rosann Paul: “I don’t think (Bosworth) would be accepted too well. But Shane’s always been an upstanding member of the church, for one thing.”

Tom Dallas smiled and said, “You don’t see too many punk haircuts around here.”

While Bosworth seems to stay awake nights thinking of ways to generate attention for himself, Conlan avoids it as best he can. While cooperative and courteous, he endures interviews as if he’s in a dentist’s chair.

Kay: He’s said right from the beginning, ‘I love playing football, but I hate the rest of it.’

“Dan’s always been shy. I’ve always been shy. It’s just not comfortable for us. Shane’s getting better at it, but he still doesn’t like it.”

The family didn’t want the sign at the town limits, either.

“We all know he lives here,” Kay said. “That’s enough.”

THE BATTERED YELLOW ’78 Dodge that Conlan drove to Penn State still sits in front of the house. He did buy a new Corvette for himself, but he doesn’t plan to get vanity plates.

“Naahhh,” he says, as if the idea were preposterous.

Conlan played for the perfect coach. Joe Paterno shuns the star system, which makes his praise of Conlan even more special.

“I’m honored because he’s not one to single one guy out,” Conlan said.

His values also fit in well. These days, with rampant drug and dollar abuse, it seems that for every athlete at Penn State there’s another headed for the state pen. But, to the credit of Paterno and the athletes he recruits, Penn State remains virtually untainted by scandal.

“As far as the drugs and steroid use, it’s just, number one, common sense,” Conlan said. “Then it’s the way I was brought up. I’ve never touched it, never will.”

“The kids who did it younger and go to Penn State, I think Joe Paterno’s gonna scare ‘em out of doing it again.”

“As far as taking money, that’s controlled by Joe. It’s common sense there, too. You know you aren’t gonna be around if you do it.”

Conlan isn't pious. He understands the other side.

"I came from a middle-class family, so we had money," he said. "They had money they could give me. Some of these guys don't have any money. It's too bad. I think you should get some money (legally)."

In the spirit of another shy, heroic role model who "fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way," Conlan also may someday give in to his celebrity and let the folks in Frewsburg put up the sign.

"If it really meant a lot to 'em, I'd say go ahead and do it, but I don't want it," he said. "I'll always come back here. I like it here. It's a good town."