Running backs may have the glamorous job of driving down the field and weaving through defenders as they pass through the red zone to the goal line. But it’s in the zone where the real action is, according to Ron Batory, who finds parallels between railroading and football. The main lines are like New York Giant Tiki Barber while terminal/switching operations like Conrail—a Meadowlands neighbor serving the Northern New Jersey, Philadelphia/South Jersey, and Detroit Shared Asset Areas—are where touchdowns are scored.

Batory, a career railroader, has led Conrail since 1998, when CSX Transportation and Norfolk Southern split up the former Class I. The job, he tells me, is one of his greatest accomplishments and biggest challenges.

“I’ve been given the opportunity to play an instrumental role in reshaping Conrail,” Batory says. “The transaction was one of a kind.” He’s charged with maintaining stable yet competitive operations with the two Class I carriers—not a stretch for this past-president of the Belt Railway Company of Chicago.

As the carveup’s 10th anniversary approaches, Batory takes pride in the results. Conrail has seen man-hours and such “unproductive” costs as derailments fall, while business levels have grown (details, RA, April, p. 19). “It took time for us to reach this point, and at the onset, it was somewhat slow-going and awkward, but we did it.” And he credits the success to his employees. “So often in business you’ll find that it’s not necessarily what’s right or wrong with the process [of reaching the goal], but getting the sponsorship and commitment of the people as change-agents to move forward and do something different,” Batory explains.

“The organization stepped up and has done a very admirable job insofar as fulfilling our responsibility to CSX, NS, the Surface Transportation Board, and the shipping community.” Getting everyone to work together was a win, and Batory is proud to have “played the hand that I was dealt,” retaining the talent in place when he came onboard. “I took the thoughts from the Conrail organization, augmented them with the best practices of NS and CSX, and added my own input,” he says.

What lies ahead for Conrail will be determined by CSX and NS. “It will be based on their evaluation of our performance and value to them and their customers,” Batory maintains. “It’s critical that our performance and achievement be equal to or greater than those we work for. If not, our role is negated.”

Among the Conrail employees that Ron Batory considers investments in the industry’s future are, at Oak Island Yard, from left: Senior Trainmaster Michael Centeno, Yardmaster Phil Delisi, Car Retarder Operator Eric Bell, and Car Retarder Operator Trainee John Loricchio. Oak Island Yard (a former Lehigh Valley Railroad facility) processes about 2,000 cars a day. Railway Age Editor William C. Vantuono and Publisher Robert P. DeMarco recently toured Northern New Jersey’s Shared Assets Area with Ron Batory.
Batory joined the industry when carriers were in and approaching bankruptcy—and despite his rail veteran father “doing everything but encouraging me.” Much has changed in 30 years. “Since Staggers, ton-miles have gone up and mileage has gone down and we’re all doing more with less,” he says. “But how well we use our capacity throughout North America going forward will depend on our people and technology.”

The railroad industry is at a pivotal point, he explains. “We’re faced with considerable attrition and we have to make sure that the values and knowledge of those nearing retirement will help develop new talent.” Industry figures show that thousands of employees will need to be hired over the next decade. “We can get those numbers, but will they stick with it?” questions Batory. To ensure they do, Conrail is focused on selecting and retaining the “right” people. It makes sense from every angle. Batory offers this example: If a railroad pays an employee $100,000 annually in salary, benefits, and training, in five years that adds up to a half-million dollars; in 30 years, more than the cost of a new locomotive. “You don’t want to lose that person,” he asserts. That’s among the reasons why Conrail considers its employees investments. “We have an obligation to maintain people, not just track,” Batory says. “Contrary to hard assets like rail, cars, and locomotives, human assets appreciate in value over time. You can have the best

track, but if you don’t have good, committed people, it’s all for naught.”

Railroads have to be committed as well, and flexible with today’s workforce. Batory, like many, started in the rank-and-file and progressed into supervisory and management roles, working various shifts and hours far-surpassing the traditional nine-to-five. But potential new-hires expect a work-life balance. “The status quo won’t work anymore,” Batory stresses. “We have to look at new, smarter ways of doing things.”

Until those new ways are determined, Conrail strives to maintain an open dialogue with employees. “We become personally involved in recruitment, selection, hiring, training, and retention,” Batory says, “and have continued, open and frank face-to-face communication with all employees, regardless of tenure. We listen, not just talk, and we’ve found that to breed the positive performance we deliver to NS and CSX today.”

Conrail Chief Engineer Tim Tierney (left) and Ron Batory discovered a dislodged guard rail near a miter rail on the moveable National Docks Bridge (ex-Pennsylvania Railroad), which spans Newark Bay, during the hi-rail inspection trip.