

# EPH LEGEND – BEN WAGNER '64

by Dick Quinn, Director Sports Information



## *The Ultimate Teammate*

things and I had my way, but I had the highest respect for him as a teammate and a captain.”

Wagner wanted Reily to be recognized for what he meant to the team, the Class of 1964, and Williams. Reily dominated on both sides of the ball as a center and linebacker as a sophomore, earning All-America honors. As a junior Reily played well, but as Wagner notes, “Mike was still very, very good, but there was just something that was a little off from the level he played as a sophomore.”

It was after Thanksgiving in 1962 that Wagner and his teammates learned that Reily had Hodgkin’s lymphoma. With his days now numbered, Reily’s goal was to graduate with his class, a goal he was able to achieve. Reily attended each football practice in 1963 and showed up for all his fraternity’s meetings and classes, though his physical stature dwindled. Reily passed away a month after graduation.

In November of 2010, Quinn learned there were three football jerseys packed in a Wilson football box in the Cole Field House equipment room. On the box was written – “#50 Do Not Issue.” Equipment manager Glenn Boyer did not know who wrote the message or whose #50 jerseys were in the box, but he knew not to issue #50. Two #50 game jerseys and a practice jersey were in the box.

When Reily’s headshot arrived on his computer from Archives, Quinn was jolted to see Reily wearing number 50. The game jerseys had stripes on the shoulders and wrists, distinctive of the Ephs in the 1960s, just like the ones he had seen in the Wilson box.

Quinn called Wagner to tell him that he was pretty sure that Mike Reily’s two game and one practice jersey had been found. Wagner was briefly stunned and then said, “Let me call Coach Navarro.”


Frank Navarro had been an assistant

coach at Williams when Wagner and Reily played. Navarro told Wagner that he and the equipment manager had tucked Reily’s jerseys aside as a silent tribute to Reily.

For nearly 50 years no one at Williams had worn that number. “The November 7, 2011 issue of Sports Illustrated featured Tim Layden’s ‘The Forgotten Hero,’ and more than 21 million readers became aware of Mike Reily’s story,” Wagner said. Three years later, in celebrating its 60th Anniversary, Sports Illustrated selected ‘The Forgotten Hero’ as one of the 60 Greatest Stories in its 60-year history.

At the November 2011 dinner where Reily’s #50 became the first retired Williams football number, many Ephs from the early 1960s were on hand, some returning for the first time. Today, perched above the Ephs’ Farley-Lamb Field is the Michael M. Reily ’64 Room with ample space for meetings and special dinners. A bronze plaque of Reily hangs on the south wall, along with Reily’s framed #50 jersey and a colorized photo of Wagner and Reily as co-captains in 1963, a thank you to Wagner from teammate Bill Chapman ’64.

“At the end of the Reily Room dedication ceremony, I was greatly moved once again by Bill Chapman’s generosity when the colorized co-captain’s photo of Mike and me was presented to be hung on the Reily Wall,” said Wagner. “Aside from personal matters, no award or honor means more to me than having served as co-captain with Mike. I am humbled and honored to have this picture, representing the extraordinary effort of Mike’s teammates, classmates, family members, and friends, hanging alongside the major Reily awards.”

Thanks to Wagner’s dedication, Reily has been honored as no other previous Eph football player. Additionally, the most prestigious Eph team honor is now the Michael M. Reily Award and is voted on annually by team members. 

It was in October 2010 that Ben Wagner ’64 suggested his classmate and teammate Mike Reily be featured on the Eph Legends page on the football team pages.

Sports Information Director Dick Quinn was familiar with both Wagner and Reily; Wagner as a baseball and football standout, Reily as a dominant presence on the Williams campus and the football field. Quinn said yes to Wagner and asked College Archives to send over a headshot of Reily, sparking the story of the college’s most recognized football player of all time.

Most of what you learn about Wagner comes from others. He played in the vaunted Cape Cod Baseball League, played offensive and defensive tackle for the Ephs, and was invited to tryout for the Kansas City Chiefs. Wagner fought in Vietnam, where he volunteered to drive swift boats, and he had a lengthy career with IBM before leaving to run the family apple farm in New Hampshire that served as a movie location for the film version of John Irving’s novel, *Cider House Rules*.

Wagner’s tryout with the Kansas City Chiefs lasted until the final cut, after which he wrote a note to Reily’s dad about his experience, concluding, “Mike would have made the team.”

Reily and Wagner were not particularly close friends. “Everybody liked Mike,” Wagner said. “He just had his way of doing