

# Reid Always Marched To His Own Beat

By Neil Rudel  
*Altoona Mirror*

**H**e was the cornerstone of a defense that is still considered one of the greatest to ever play college football.

Co-captain of the unbeaten 1968 and 1969 teams. Consensus All-American. Outland Trophy winner. First-round draft pick. Rookie of the year. All-Pro.

Most football players with his ability could have milked every last dollar out of the game, or certainly played long enough to guarantee inevitable enshrinement into the National Football League Hall of Fame, but we're not talking about most players here.

We're talking about Mike Reid.

The Reid who recorded two safeties in his first varsity appearance.

The Reid who intercepted his own deflection and romped for a touchdown in his final appearance at Beaver Stadium.

The Reid who was as quick a defensive lineman as Penn State has ever had and was almost constantly double teamed, even while in the NFL with Cincinnati.

The Reid who walked away from football during his prime to embark on a music career that began with piano-bar performances in smoke-filled taverns, earning \$100-plus per week.

The Reid who did as much as any other player to get Joe Paterno's Grand Experiment off to a roaring start.

The Reid, who in achieving national recognition on the field and as a Grammy Award-winning songwriter off it, has best epitomized the values on which Penn State football prides itself.

Today, life for Reid consists of working as an extremely successful songwriter in Nashville. He has been named Country Music Songwriter of the Year and two years ago won a coveted Grammy for his work, "Stranger in My House," sung by Ronnie Milsap.

His once hectic traveling schedule has been reduced to a dozen or so hand-picked concerts a year. He recently played for a packed house in Altoona where he drew three standing ovations.

The 38-year-old Reid is completely removed from football. He says he'll catch an occasional Penn State game if he knows it's going to be televised and he enjoys watching "Walter Payton, like everybody else," but he'll rarely watch more than a quarter of an NFL game on Sunday.

"I'm not anti-sports, but I don't have to make an attempt not to watch. I'm just not a fan of the game," Reid said. "I still work out regularly, swim and bicycle. I live a physical life.

He could never convince people – until he retired from football – that music was more than just a hobby that made for a good human-interest story.



*As a rookie in Cincinnati, Mike beat out Pittsburgh's Joe Greene for the AFC Defensive Rookie of the Year in 1970.*

"He loved football, he used to play in the mud with the neighborhood boys out here, but mostly it was music," his mother, Mrs. Charlotte Reid, recalled.

"He started taking piano lessons in the second grade."

Reid's intensity and ability on the field made his musical fantasy that much more unique.

"Mike was an unusual kind of person," said Jim O'Hora, who was in charge of Penn State's defense during the early years of Paterno's regime. "In a way, his personality probably belied his ability to compete and his ferociousness at times."

O'Hora said Reid sometimes portrayed a "Jekyll-Hyde" personality.

"When Mike couldn't do something well, he was apt to go into a tirade of some sort. You would wonder if he had gone off his rocker for a moment, but it was only because of what he wanted to accomplish."

Like Reid's first game during his junior year after sitting out a redshirt season with a knee injury.

"My first encounter with Mike was during my sophomore year," said Steve Smear, who played alongside Reid as defensive

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tackle for two years. "We were in the locker room before the Navy game and Mike was in a rage. I remember a couple of us hiding in the corner of the room so we wouldn't get hurt. But that's the way he was. He was emotional and an inspiration."

O'Hora also remembers some of Reid's softer moments.

"In the preseason camp in the dormitory, down in the rec room, before bed and after our evening meetings, Mike would be playing the piano. He just loved to sit there, practically in the dark. A lot of the players would congregate and if they wanted to join in a song, they would do that, too."

Much was written about Reid's image, to the point where he thinks it was overblown.

"The savage beast soothing his soul at the keyboard sort of got blown out of proportion," Reid said. "It makes good copy, but the thing that makes me most happy now is that my son, Matty, has taught me more about how to relax."

"I was probably too intense in certain situations when I was younger. I think there were a lot of players I played with I think were more talented and the only way I was going to keep up was the emotional end of it. (But) you couldn't live that way all the time."

The result was Reid quietly walking away from football after the 1974 season.

"He always told his dad and I that he wouldn't make football his career," Mrs. Reid said. "He said, 'Someday, Mom, you're going to hear that I retired.' He never told his dad and I. I heard it on the news."

Soon after, Reid arrived in Grand Ole Opryland where he has found peace with his wife, Susan, and two-year-old son Matthew.

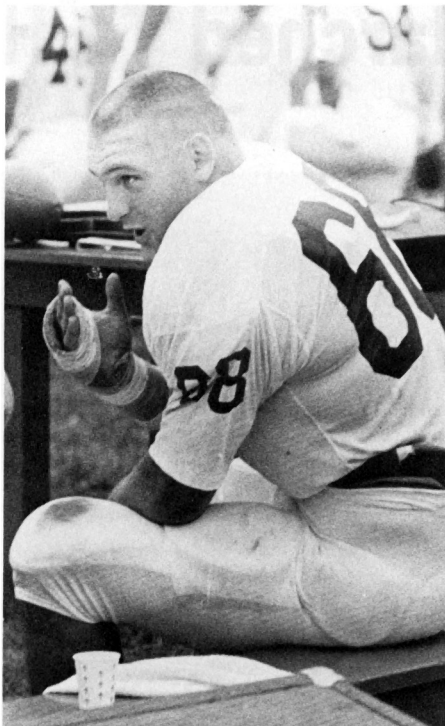
Reid takes pride in being part of Penn State's first two teams that helped put Eastern football on the map, but believes all credit belongs to Paterno.

"When we were there – (Steve) Smear, (Jack) Ham, (Dennis) Onkotz, Dave Bradley and all the guys," Reid said, "we didn't have any sense that we were building a program. You realized that after the fact."

"We had the sense that we were in the presence of a fairly dominant figure in Paterno. In my early years, there was a feeling of Eastern football being second class. What Joe has done in the last 15 years (actually 20) has erased that."

"Here in the south, Penn State football and Joe are very highly regarded. No matter where I go, when people knew you were from Penn State, they wanted to know about Joe and what kind of a guy he is."

The majority of college football fans felt State's '69 team deserved to be awarded the national championship after controlling Missouri in the Orange Bowl. Reid, how-



ever, said he "doesn't feel emptiness" about it and, frankly, said Penn State can only blame itself.

"Dammit," he said in typically candid Reid fashion, "we should have gone down there and played Texas (in the Cotton Bowl). There's no two ways about it. When we voted on a bowl game, Ohio State was (ranked) one, Texas was two and we were

three. Ohio State was so dominant that year. Only a fool would have thought they were going to lose. At that point, the team decided, 'Let's go to where we're going to have fun.' Then Ohio State lost, and there we were, going to the Orange Bowl, for God's sake. What a mess."

Penn State beat a good Missouri team 10-3 in a defensive struggle.

"I don't think we were cheated," Reid said. "You live by the poll, you die by the poll."

It was during Reid's senior year when he began to sour on football. His knees were hurting, there was the pressure of Penn State's winning streak and he felt nothing could duplicate his junior year, which culminated with the legendary 15-14 win over Kansas in the Orange Bowl.

He went on, of course, to the Bengals, but played only five years. Although he respected Paul Brown and the Bengal organization, he was in the wrong element.

Reid played football for fun – "I'm in total disagreement that football builds character; whatever I am was cast by my mom and dad and growing up in Altoona," – and could not relate to the mentality of pro sports.

"I was tired of hurting; I had three knee operations and a bad back," he said. "The business part of it began to crush out and I just lost interest. There's no other way to put it. I thought about it a long time before I did it . . . and I've never regretted it."



*Penn State's Joe Paterno and Altoona Coach Earl Strohm were on hand to honor Mike after his senior season.*