

Mike Irwin:

Versatility became his trademark at Penn State

By Neil Rudel
Altoona Mirror

Much has changed since Mike Irwin was elected Joe Paterno's first captain back in 1966.

The Nittany Lions have been voted national champions twice and on two other occasions needed recounts. They've become a consistent Top 10 program, joined the Big Ten, expanded their recruiting base and produced numerous All-Americans.

In '66, tickets were \$5 per home game; now they're \$30.

But one thing that hasn't changed much is Irwin himself. Paterno has bumped into him occasionally over the years and, he said as recently as a week ago, "it's hard to believe it was 35 years ago. Mike still looks like the same kid."

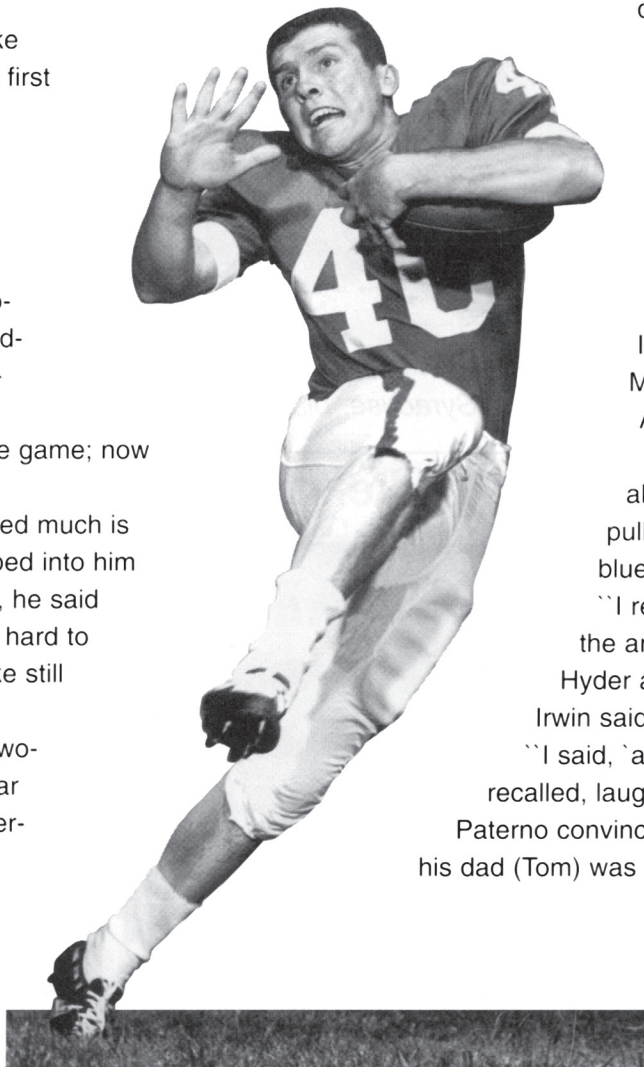
Irwin was the last of an era of two-way players. He was a three-year starter at Penn State, as a cornerback and tailback who led the Lions in interceptions as a sophomore and all-purpose yards as a junior with a 7.1 yards-per-carry average.

He was voted the Lions' most valuable player in 1966 and still ranks among the top kick returners in PSU history.

All told, Irwin rushed 109 times for 619 yards (5.2 average), caught 30 passes for 399 yards, returned 48 kicks or punts, scored nine touchdowns and had three interceptions.

"Mike was a really fun guy to coach and a really good athlete," Paterno said. "He was very, very quick. He could have been a great free safety and offensively, we couldn't afford not to use him."

Paterno also remembers Irwin being "a tough kid to



For the camera, Mike strikes his Heisman pose.

recruit."

In those days, there was no signing date and rules were much more relaxed. In fact, Irwin and Paterno, who was then 12 years into his assistant-coaching tenure under Rip Engle, can both vividly remember a scene in the Bishop Guilfoyle parking lot after a basketball practice.

Irwin was set to go to dinner with Maryland assistant Roland Arrigoni and Dan McKnight, who played for Altoona and was already at Maryland. Paterno pulled into the parking lot in his blue Pontiac.

"I remember him grabbing me by the arm and inviting (BG coach) John Hyder and (Dick) Moran to dinner," Irwin said.

"I said, 'are you going with me?'" Paterno recalled, laughing.

Paterno convinced Irwin to commit – "I think his dad (Tom) was on our side," Paterno said later – and fellow assistant Dan Radakovich, who will present Irwin tonight, showed up at the family's home the next morning for breakfast.

"I was an impressionable 18-year-old kid," Irwin said.

"When I visited Maryland, it was a nice weekend. When I visited Penn State, it was snowing. But I never regretted the decision. In fact, it's been very gratifying and with Joe becoming such a national figure, being his first captain has been an honor." After losing four of its first five, the 1964 team finished 6-4, including a 27-0 smacking of No. 2 Ohio State in Columbus.

"By the end of the year, we were as good as anybody in the country," Paterno said.

Blair County Sports Hall of Fame '98



Mike (40), turning the corner against Syracuse, played both ways his last two years at Penn State.

The '65 team, Engle's last, entered the season ranked No. 6 but finished 5-5 and lost four games by a touchdown or less including two (California and UCLA) on the last offensive play.

"Rip said we had more bad luck than any team he ever had," Irwin said.

Paterno admitted Irwin should have been used more offensively during the '65 season, but the former BG standout still opened the '66 season on defense. When the offense sputtered, however, he moved back over and helped the team finish .500.

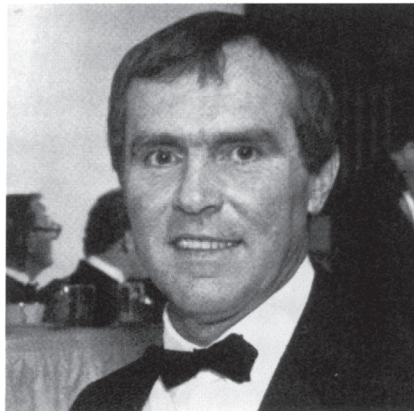
"I didn't really get comfortable until late in the season," he said.

Irwin was drafted in the 16th round by the Buffalo Bills, who were among the old AFL's elite at that time.

"Bob Riggie, who I played ahead of, made it with the Atlanta Falcons," Irwin said. "I think I was with the wrong team. They didn't need many rookies."

Penn State's success through

Mike Irwin



Sport: Football.

High school: Bishop Guilfoyle, 1962.

College: Penn State University.

Hall of Fame achievement: Three-year starter and Joe Paterno's first captain at Penn State. Drafted by the Buffalo Bills.

Current occupation: Owner of investment company.

Current residence: Altoona.

the years has kept Irwin's legend alive. So has his family (wife Gail and three children) and being in his hometown, where the Irwin family has made a strong impact on the local sports scene. Irwin's late father, Tom, was a former baseball standout and a 1989 inductee and his brother Tom is Bishop Guilfoyle's long-time head football coach.

Irwin and his dad mark the first father-son tandem to be inducted into the Hall of Fame.

"I always admired my dad for his competitive spirit and desire to succeed," Irwin said. "It's certainly an honor for me to follow in his footsteps."

Now the owner of Irwin Financial in Altoona, the outgoing Irwin is never far from his fond Penn State memories. And even the not-so-fond ones, like the time Michigan State defensive end Bubba Smith caught him from behind on a kickoff return. Irwin has been reminded about that play a thousand times and his response is always the same:

"He had the angle."