

Icons Among Us: The Golden Greek

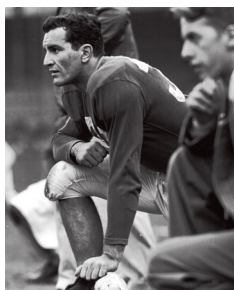
1950s sports phenom Harry Agganis looms large

THE GAME MIGHT not have been as fast in the early 1950s and the cameras that filmed the action not as sophisticated, but in vintage clips from the BU gridiron, number 33 still moves like mercury, slipping tackles, floating downfield, tossing perfect spirals—a pedestal destined for his cleats.

Although struck down just as he was taking flight, Harry Agganis (SED'54) fulfilled that destiny and then some: dead 55 years, his spirit still soars, his name gracing a foundation, a street, and an arena.

The bronze demigod presides over Comm Ave, poised to launch a pigskin above the T tracks and into forever.

"He was incredibly gifted," says Tom Demakis, chairman of the Agganis Foundation, which provides college scholarships to student-athletes from



Boston and the North Shore. "In high school, the coach at Notre Dame said Harry was the finest prospect he'd ever seen. Warren

McGuirk, the head coach and athletic director at UMass, said, "This boy is ready for the NFL right now."

The son of Greek immigrants, Agganis was born Aristotle George Agganis in 1929 in Lynn, Mass. He was equally masterful swinging a bat and fielding grounders, and he left his mark all over the playing fields of Lynn Classical High School, where he was known to fans as the "Golden Greek."

"He was recruited by every college in the country," says his great-nephew

Greg Agganis (SHA'92), a member of the Agganis Foundation board. "But his main goal was to stay local, be close to his widowed mother, and help build a football program at BU."

As a Terrier, the six-foot-one Agganis suited up mostly as a quarterback. During his sophomore year, in 1949, he rewrote the school record book by tossing 15 touchdown passes and throwing for 1,042 yards. In 1950, he left school to serve in the U.S. Marine Corps, but returned a year later to guide BU on the gridiron, snagging the University's first All-America honors in football. With 15 school records in his pocket, Agganis was inducted into BU's Athletics Hall of Fame as soon as he stepped off the graduation stage, his number 33 jersey retired.

Cleveland Browns head coach Paul Brown saw in Agganis a successor to his superstar quarterback Otto Graham, also a dual-sport athlete. Brown drafted the BU junior in the first round of the NFL draft in 1952, dangling a \$25,000 bonus, but Boston Red Sox owner Tom Yawkey one-upped Brown, signing Agganis as a first baseman. Yawkey had local loyalty on his side. Agganis' devotion

to his mother, his hometown, and his alma mater was bottomless.

"He was passionate about BU," says Greg Agganis, who is currently at work on a documentary about his great-uncle. "Even when he signed with the Red Sox, he went back to campus and coached a little bit with the football and baseball teams."

In his rookie year in the majors, Agganis led American League first basemen in assists and fielding per-

centage and hit 11 homers. The next season, he was battling cleanup after Ted Williams and hitting .313.

In the middle of May 1955, complaining of a fever and intense chest pains, he was hospitalized with viral pneumonia. He was released a week and a half later and rejoined the Sox on a swing of road games. But in Kansas City, he fell ill again and was flown back

to Boston. A few days later, as he appeared to be on the mend, he died suddenly of a pulmonary embolism, a large blood clot that blocked a main artery to his lungs. Thousands filed past his coffin at a Lynn church, and an estimated 20,000 lined the cortege route.

Flags were at half-mast and tributes recited in the U.S. Capitol chambers. Agganis was 26. ■



WEB EXTRA
Watch a video of Harry Agganis in action at bu.edu/bostonia.

