

LIGHT Walks the Line

BY WILLIAM MEINERS

A multiple Super Bowl winner and pivotal member of a renowned New England offensive line, this Patriot, nevertheless, marches to a tune that's decidedly his own.

Anyone who has spent any weekend couch time watching football has surely seen the Visa® commercials with all-world quarterback Tom Brady out on the town with his fully clad offensive linemen in tow. Among Brady's protective giants, serving as "metaphors" for the credit card's security features, is Matt Light (IT'01). In the role of "zero liability," Light could likewise be a walking metaphor for his own young NFL career.

Already a part of three Super Bowl-winning teams, Light has hardly been a liability to the New England Patriots. Entering the 2005 season, he had started 60 straight games at left tackle, dating to the 10th game of his rookie season in 2001. And like the famed quarterback he's paid to protect, Light's never even lost a playoff game. But would you believe it's something he never dreamed about as a child?

"I never even watched a Super Bowl until I played in one," Light says.

An avid outdoorsman, Light spent his boyhood days in Greenville, Ohio, fishing, hunting and exploring. "As a kid, I thought maybe I would be a forest ranger out in the middle of nowhere," says Light. "But as I got older, I worried about making ends meet out in the woods."

So the kid who simply enjoyed tromping around outside and playing football didn't think about college until he started getting letters after his junior year. He didn't think about the pros until after the Outback Bowl in his junior year at Purdue when agents started expressing interest. Still, none of the success came easy.

"I think about the first conversation I had with Matt about moving from tight end to tackle," says Joe Tiller, his former coach. Tiller had arrived at Purdue in the spring of 1997 after Light had played in several games his freshman year at tight end, even catching one pass.

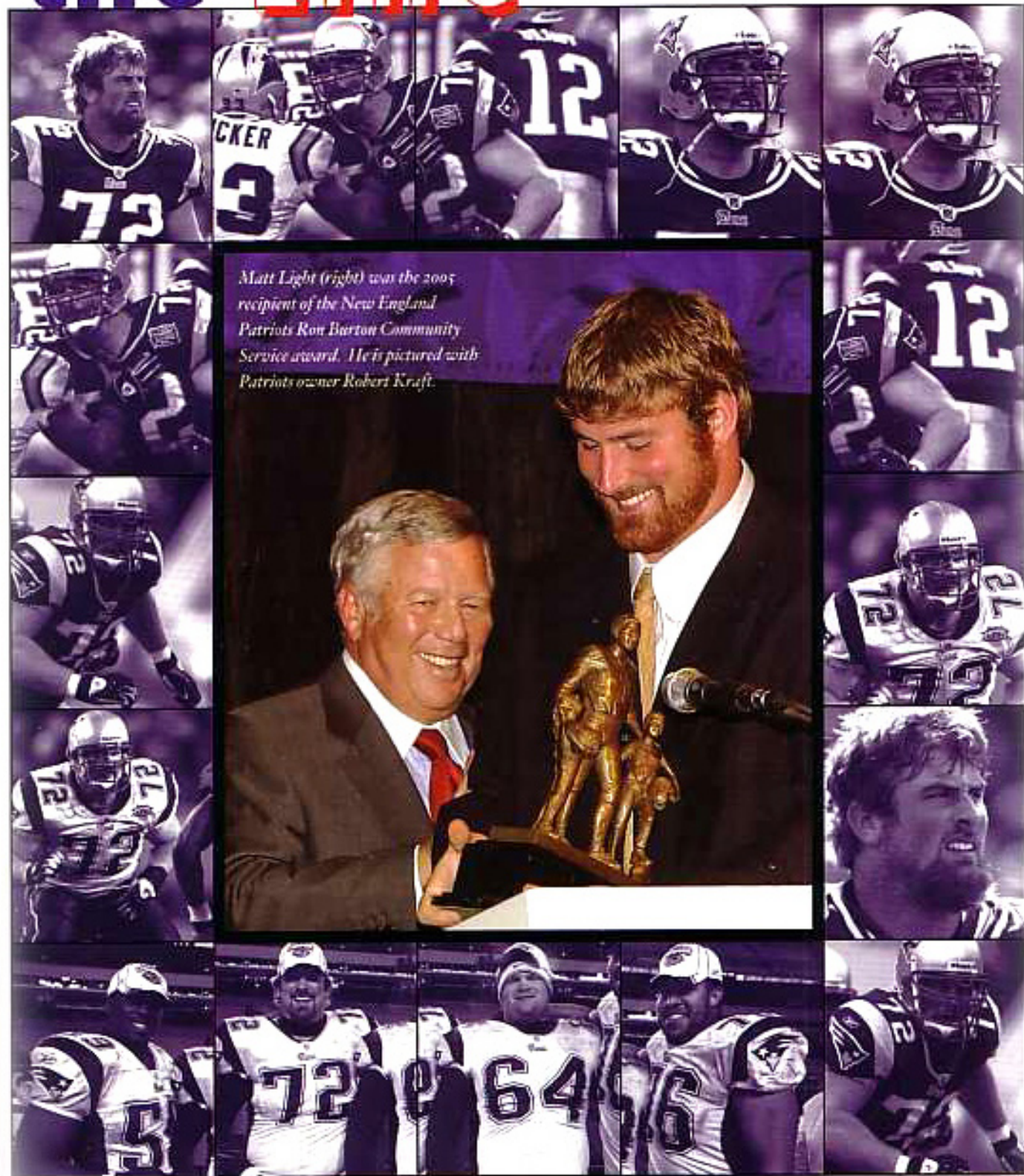
Light initially resisted the position move. Tiller persisted: "I said, 'That's your choice, Matt. But if you go to tackle, who knows, you might have a future in this game.'"

That future blossomed as Light grew from a 230-pound freshman to a 270-pound redshirt sophomore (he lost one year to injury) to 300-plus pounds in his senior year. "I thought he had a great temperament for an offensive lineman," Tiller says. "He's a tough guy and kind of a nasty guy, but he controls it. Some guys are that way and they can't control it. As a result, they're too aggressive offensively and they put themselves in compromising positions. Matt's aggressive, but his is a controlled aggression."

Light improved each year at Purdue as a player, controlling his aggression on the field while adding weight and finding laughs on campus. "I would characterize him as a character," says Tiller. "He had a lot of fun here at Purdue."

"Is that a polite way of saying I'm a little off?" Light asks. "I guess I did like the practical jokes back then."

One joke included convincing a writer working on a story about the hobbies of various players that he and teammate Jimmy Niedrach (CFS'99) were members of a local band. "There was a story about Travis Dorsch's baseball collection," Light says. "So we wanted to top that." Unbeknownst to the pair, whom Light says, "knew about four



Matt Light (right) was the 2005 recipient of the New England Patriots Ron Barton Community Service award. He is pictured with Patriots owner Robert Kraft.

PURDUE PLAYERS IN THE PROS

Ian Allen, OL - Arizona Cardinals
Mike Alstott, FB - Tampa Bay Buccaneers
Akin Ayodele, LB - Jacksonville Jaguars
Drew Brees, QB - San Diego Chargers
Kelly Butler, T - Detroit Lions
Rosevelt Colvin, LB - New England Patriots
Gilbert Gardner, OLB - Indianapolis Colts
Jon Goldsberry, FB - Buffalo Bills (practice squad)
Brandon Gorin, T - New England Patriots
Nick Hardwick, C - San Diego Chargers
Landon Johnson, OLB - Cincinnati Bengals
Niko Koutouvides, ILB - Seattle Seahawks
Matt Light, T - New England Patriots
Pete Loughheed, T - Cincinnati Bengals (practice squad)
Gene Mruzckowski, G-C - New England Patriots
Joe Odom, LB - Chicago Bears
Chike Okefor, DE - Arizona Cardinals
Chukky Okobi, C - Pittsburgh Steelers
Kyle Orton, QB - Chicago Bears
Shaun Phillips, OLB - San Diego Chargers
Jacques Reeves, CB - Dallas Cowboys
Stuart Schweigert, FS - Oakland Raiders
John Standeford, WR - Indianapolis Colts (practice squad)
Craig Terrill, DT - Seattle Seahawks
Jeff Zgonina, DT - Miami Dolphins

chords between us," the writer arranged for a mini-concert on the 50-yard line of Ross-Ade Stadium and a photo, complete with cheerleaders.

"We tried to free-lance our way through Johnny Cash and then a Hank Junior tune," Light says, "and they kept telling us to act natural." But the gig was quickly up.

In another photo op, Light convinced some teammates to pose in Speedos. "That's not a good look for a 300-pound guy," Light says of a photo that ended up in *USA Today*.

"I had a great time," says Light. "Back with [Drew] Brees and the guys, we had a lot of good times on the hill. I'll always remember Purdue as a classy, first-rate university which had a small-town feeling, but the big-time fun. And I always enjoy getting back and hanging out with old friends."

Carleta Downs, a secretary in intercollegiate athletics, remembers the character and the player. "I remember Matt from his first day on campus," she says. "I also remember seeing him take a hit that I was afraid would end his career. He was a fun-loving kid who has gone on to do some great things."

TRANSITIONING TO ADULthood

From the high times on the hill to Purdue's most recent Rose Bowl appearance, Light was drafted away from campus in 2001 into the very businesslike world of the NFL. In addition to the game becoming a full-time job, Light also had to adjust to the real-life issues of a new life in Boston, mortgages and, in fairly short order, a wife and kids. "It was a big lifestyle change," says Light, now the father of a 3-year-old daughter and a 6-month-old son.

For the champion Patriots, a workmanlike approach to football is trademark to their success. On a typical day, Light awakens at 6 a.m. to get to work by 6:45. Treatment for various ailments and morning meetings take him and his teammates through the noon-hour lunch. After a two-hour practice, the team returns to meetings to go over what happened in practice, usually until about 5 or 6 p.m.

"It's a real job," Light says. "At this level there's a lot of stress because there's so much riding on it. It can be a very tough environment."

Still, Light's nasty toughness has served him well at the highest level of this game. And there are some chances for levity off the field. He says he is closest with his fellow lineman on the team. He and another Purdue grad, Brandon Gorin (1E'00) often debate the merits of a technology degree (like Light's) versus an engineering degree (like Gorin's). On the Visa commercial, he reports, "Tommy [Brady] threw us a bone with that. We yukked it up for a couple of days and had a lot of fun."

While referring to Light as the team comedian, Brady also knows how seriously the lineman takes his job. "In my position," the quarterback says, "you always want to know that your backside is protected. There's nobody else I'd rather have over there. He's a great player. Matt is goofy as hell, but I love him. I love the fact that he's over there. He's very smart, and he studies hard. Football is very important to him."

BETTER LIVING THROUGH GIVING

Three Super Bowl victories may not be a dream come true for Light, but it's more than a good résumé builder for a potential forest ranger. His biggest gain, Light claims, is his family at home. "Life is a stepping stone," he says, "and you go from one rock to another."

"I've had to mature. You can tell Carleta [Tiller's administrative assistant] that. I've learned to change diapers and make bottles. My wife has me on a pretty good program."

And part of the program of transitioning to full adult maturation, for Light anyway, is giving something back. He began the Light Foundation to help kids in the areas in which he's lived.

"Our tagline is 'Better Living Through Giving,'" he says, "so we donate a lot to other charities. We seek non-profits that are small but are capable of making a big impact."

The foundation also has run two different free football camps, one in Ohio and another in Rhode Island. "We had sponsored over 800 kids for five days in Rhode Island last summer," Light says.

His ultimate goal would be to open camps, similar to Paul Newman's "The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp," that would introduce kids to the outdoors. "We want to take kids on woods walks, teach them how to shoot a bow," Light says. "We're a ways off from getting there, but of the money raised each year, we keep some to fund that dream."

Light also wants to host an event back at Purdue. "Nothing too normal, though," he says. "I think everyone is bored with golf tournaments. We could do sporting clays or something like that."

Who knows? After a day of fund-raising and outdoor fun, maybe revelers could top the evening off with a karaoke course through the Johnny Cash songbook. It could make for a good photo opportunity.

Visit www.mattlightfoundation.org for more information on the Light Foundation. The author is a senior writer for Purdue's College of Engineering. He's also editor in chief of "Sport Literate" magazine.



Hostess Ways

What are your plans for this year's Super Bowl?

For Faithe Ways (LA'04), she will be in downtown Detroit at Ford Field, watching nine months of hard work unfold. Ways (pictured above) is the administrator of communications and external affairs for the Super Bowl XL Host Committee. Since May, she has clocked more than 1,600 hours to help plan and promote Super Bowl XL.

"My primary responsibilities include managing our speaker's bureau, writing monthly articles for our Web site and maintaining our Emerging Business Program," says Ways, a native of Lathrup Village, Mich., just outside of Detroit. "Every day is different and that makes my job exciting. I know when I go to work, today will not be like yesterday and tomorrow will not be like today."

The Emerging Business Program is a program for certified minority and women-owned businesses in Michigan.

"These companies are included in the Host Committee's business resource guide, which is utilized by the NFL and its contractors, sponsors and event planners in the bidding process," explains Ways. This year, she has organized five business workshops for the participants.

While Ways' enthusiasm and organization skills make her a good fit for her position, her love of football makes it all the more interesting. "I've been a football fan since my brother began playing in high school," she says.

Super Bowl XL festivities kick off with the NFL Experience at Cobo Center, Feb. 1-5, featuring family events and NFL-related activities. After the pre-Super Bowl festivities are over, the climax of the football season will commence—Super Bowl XL. Only after the game, when everyone has headed home, will Ways breathe a sigh of relief.

At the end of March, the Host Committee will dissolve, but Ways will not walk away empty-handed.

"I hope my experience from working with the Super Bowl XL Host Committee will help further my pursuit of a legal career in the sports industry," she explains. "Being a part of the Host Committee has been a valuable learning experience. Super Bowl XL is going to be a great time for everyone and will showcase Detroit and everything it has to offer." —Shari Gasper