ANDY Talley sat at his desk in the building named for him, a pile of index cards in front of him, and the words coming slowly for a man accustomed to speaking in public. In just four days, 200 guests would gather on a mid-February evening at Overbrook Country Club to celebrate Talley’s 32 years as Villanova’s head football coach and help ease him into retirement and emeritus status within the program.

Former players, high school friends, college roommates from Southern Connecticut State, family, members of the Villanova community, conference administrators and other college athletics types would salute Talley’s achievements and his effect on their lives, the University and football in general. It would be a night of stories and reminiscing, of laughter and gratitude. It would be a fitting tribute to the man who revived a football program and built it into a national power, and a gleaming emblem of success and athletic virtue. And Talley was more worried about that night than he had been about any opponent during his 37-year head coaching career.

“This is the first time I have ever done something like this,” he said, clearly uneasy with the whole idea. “It’s certainly something I appreciate, but I don’t have the words. Usually, I’m pretty good at having words, but I don’t want to hurt anybody’s feelings. I don’t want to leave anybody out.”

Talley had been intimately involved in the event’s planning, making sure the invitation list included those most important to him and the program. He had chosen three former players—one from each of his decades as the head coach at Villanova—to address the crowd, and he would serve as the master of ceremonies.

GOING LONG

The night was a huge success and provided a symbolic close to Talley’s time at Villanova. The official conclusion had come Dec. 3, when the Wildcats dropped a 10–7 decision at South Dakota State in the second round of the NCAA tournament, the 12th time one of Talley’s teams had reached the playoffs. Though the loss was disappointing, the coach’s tenure ended in the postseason, with the Wildcats again among the nation’s best.

RETIRING HEAD FOOTBALL COACH

ANDY TALLEY LEAVES VILLANOVA A LEGACY OF SUCCESS AND SERVICE

BY MICHAEL BRADLEY

“He taught football fundamentals, but he also taught us what matters in life. That’s the most important lesson.”

—Brian Westbrook, a Villanova Football player from 1998 to 2001 who spent nine years in the NFL

Andy Talley, Villanova’s head football coach for more than 30 years, was known as much for his football expertise as for his mentorship of hundreds of student-athletes.

“Although Andy’s retirement signals the end of an era of unprecedented success for Villanova Football, it’s also an opportunity to celebrate all that he built on and off the field,” says University President the Rev. Peter M. Donohue, OSA, PhD, ’75 CLAS. Talley’s teams accomplished plenty during his 32 seasons, including 229 victories, shares of six conference titles and the 2009 national championship. But his positive influence on the Villanova community goes beyond the football field. Talley created a program that embodied the University’s principles, with education and service valued ahead of wins and losses. His teams provided a strong public face for the school’s mission and embraced Talley’s decades-long commitment to registering bone marrow donors.

“He had a large impact not just from a football perspective but on how the program benefited the University,” says Brett Gordon ’02 VSB, a Villanova quarterback from 1999 to 2002 who graduated with seven school passing records and led the Wildcats to the 2002 national semifinals. “Since the beginning, Coach Talley has run a first-class program both
on and off the field. Under his leadership, Villanova Football has always represented the values of the University, and that message was always communicated to his players. Talley arrived at Villanova in 1984 after five seasons at St. Lawrence University, charged with the substantial task of beginning the Football program anew. Three years earlier, a variety of circumstances had led the University to suspend the program. Talley had few players at his disposal and limited resources. He squinted the Wildcats through pioneering campaigns as independents, without a conference home, and eventually led them into the Yankee Conference, where in 1989 he tied for the league championship, and 18 years of experience as an assistant coach, most notably his success, Mark Ferrante, while continuing to oversee big decisions, recruit players and shape the culture of the program.

The step back preserved Talley’s health and prepared him well for his new role as mentor to Ferrante, whose office is down the hall from his former boss’ spot. Talley says he provides counsel and suggestions “behind the scenes” and acts as a sounding board. Ferrante’s football knowledge and 18 years of experience as an assistant coach at Villanova will ensure a smooth transition, and the new head coach is glad to have access to Talley’s expertise. “He says to me all the time, ‘I don’t want to step on toes. I don’t want to get in the way,’” Ferrante says. “As I’ve stated to Coach, I’m going to use you as a consultant and utilize your experience and knowledge.” He did this job for more than 30 years, so if something comes up, I’m going down the hall.”

“It’s ideal to have Andy continue to be a part of the program, particularly on the offensive side. He’s an experienced offensive coordinator, and I think he enjoys it,” says Brian Westbrook ’01 VSB, who, under Talley, won the Walter Payton Award in 2001 and who played on and off the field while positively impacting the lives of hundreds of players.

“Talley realized he had to make a change. ‘It’s tough when you are a type A person, but I had to redo my personality.’” He delegated more to his coaching staff, most notably his successor, Mark Ferrante, while continuing to oversee big decisions, recruit players and shape the culture of the program. The step back preserved Talley’s health and prepared him well for his new role as mentor to Ferrante, whose office is down the hall from his former boss’ spot.”

SMOOTH HANDOFF

During the first half of his career, Talley was intimately involved in all aspects of the program, particularly on the offensive side. His time, windowless office served as the site of weekly quarterback meetings, where signal-callers reviewed game film with Talley. But a heart attack in 2002 forced Talley to step away from the more stressful aspects of the job.

“I don’t know if you can call it an epiphany, but as I was on this cold table in the emergency room with all those lines in me, I said, ‘I could die here,’” Talley recalls. After having two stents put into arteries, Talley realized he had to make a change. “It’s tough when you are a type A person, but I had to redo my personality.” He delegated more to his coaching staff, most notably his successor, Mark Ferrante, while continuing to oversee big decisions, recruit players and shape the culture of the program. The step back preserved Talley’s health and prepared him well for his new role as mentor to Ferrante, whose office is down the hall from his former boss’ spot. Talley says he provides counsel and suggestions “behind the scenes” and acts as a sounding board. Ferrante’s football knowledge and 18 years of experience as an assistant coach at Villanova will ensure a smooth transition, and the new head coach is glad to have access to Talley’s expertise. “He says to me all the time, ‘I don’t want to step on toes. I don’t want to get in the way,’” Ferrante says. “As I’ve stated to Coach, I’m going to use you as a consultant and utilize your experience and knowledge.” He did this job for more than 30 years, so if something comes up, I’m going down the hall.”

“It’s ideal to have Andy continue to be present at Villanova throughout this transition and beyond, and Mark Ferrante is the perfect successor to build on the impressive foundation that Andy established,” says Director of Athletics Mark Jackson.

Talley’s perspective is a big reason he was able to thrive in the same position through the tenures of three University presidents and five athletic directors. By understanding Villanova’s culture so thoroughly and propagating it enthusiastically, Talley became part of the institutional fabric. “He brought consistency and continuity,” says Vince Nicasio, the University’s previous director of Athletics and now the deputy commissioner and chief operating officer of the Big East Conference. “He set the tone. There was very little turnover in his staff, and he was able to create a culture where the team was successful while doing it the right way. That sticks with you. He made a big impact on the people he worked with.”

Talley instilled the Augustinian ethos in his players, who volunteered for Special Olympics, St. Thomas of Villanova Day of Service, Campus Ministry outreach and other activities hosted by the University and in the wider community. Their willingness to step up and help made him proud.

FROM FIELD TO FOUNDATION

Despite his fabulous football résumé, Talley’s biggest legacy is his tireless efforts to increase the number of potential bone marrow donors. With the help of his players, Talley began on-campus registration drives in 1992, after he learned of the devastating odds facing blood cancer patients in need of transplants. He partnered with Be The Match in 2008, creating the “Get in the Game. Save a Life” initiative. Since then, more than 71,000 people have registered. Talley expects to add 10,000 to 12,000 this year. He is particularly excited that Penn State has joined the dozens of college football programs involved in this cause.

“I’m going to do this until I die,” says Talley, who founded the Andy Talley Bone Marrow Foundation in 2010. “I have more energy for it, now that I don’t have to worry about recruiting and practices.” Those and other gridiron concerns are Ferrante’s now, and he has a proven platform of success on which to build. Bob Brady ’89 VSB, ’91 MBA, who played on some of Talley’s earliest teams, remembers how tough the coach could be on the players but also how well he prepared them to succeed after they left campus. “I think he served the University’s mission unbelievably well,” Brady says. “He lived the culture, and that was why he was so successful on the field and off the field while positively impacting the lives of so many.” Now, those are just the right words.