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# Road Tested

## Billy Wagner's Trying Life Makes Him Tough Enough For The Job

By Glenn Minnis

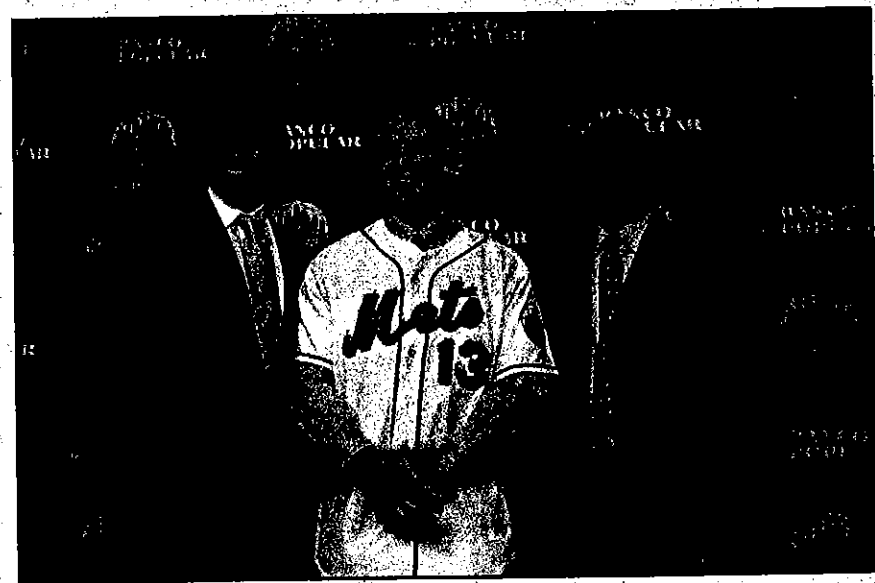
The nature of what new Mets closer Billy Wagner does—protecting his team's lead late in the game and ensuring victory—requires a measure of moxie matched by few other job descriptions. Essentially, he is asked to pride himself upon securing the hopes and pursuits of other men.

you're his friend, you're part of his family."

And while life for the ever-dependable Wagner has had its share of lows, the \$43 million star reliever still rises.

### TAKING THE SHUTTLE BUS

In the midst of dealing with sports injuries and adjustments, Wagner, born to teenage parents, was regularly being



It's been a long road for Billy Wagner—from chopping tobacco stalks in Virginia to this.

For sure, it's a duty not everyone's cut out for, but it's a responsibility Wagner seems built to thrive at. The criteria? Try a tested soul. An equally unyielding resolve. The kind of perseverance that triumphed when the natural right-hander twice broke his arm playing football, only to train himself to throw from a major-league worthy southpaw stance.

If our life experiences truly are the gauge of what we ultimately become, it makes sense that Wagner now finds himself thrust into the position of someone constantly called upon to create closure, whether it's for his team in a must-win spot or those close to him in tragic times.

"He's a great father and husband, and all-around great family man," says Wagner's best friend and former college roommate Erik Robinson. "If

shuttled from town to town, home to home, person to person.

Ultimately, he came to reside with his grandparents in Virginia, where soon destitution and deprivation became as common as the air he breathed. To ease his mind as well as help out around the house, Wagner often worked from dusk till dawn on weekends, bailing hay and chopping down tobacco stalks that stood nearly as tall as he did.

By adolescence, he was on the move yet again, this time taking refuge with an aunt and uncle not far up the road. Finally blessed with the slightest semblance of stability, Wagner thrived, excelling in both baseball and football, even starring alongside his cousin on the gridiron.

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After high school, it was onto nearby Division III Ferrum College, where Wagner quickly began to make a new life for himself and carve out an existence all his own, even as hardship and heartache always seemed to find him.

#### MAKING STRIDES

Wagner met Sarah Quesenberry in 1990, and by 1994, they had wed, paving the way for her sports-enthused dad to emerge as the father figure Wagner had never known. At times, the two almost seemed inseparable, chatting endlessly about Wagner's long-held

athletic aspirations and how best to deal with a bevy of pro scouts' proclamations that the 5-foot-9-inch, 145-pound, 90-plus-mph flamethrower was too small to compete on the next level.

Soon, however, all those trials and tribulations were reduced to triviality, as Wagner's NCAA record mark of 19.1 strikeouts per nine innings in 1992 was enough to garner him the attention he craved respect he had earned. After a dominating year in the Cape Cod League, the Houston Astros were the first squad to allay his fears, tapping Wagner No. 12 overall in the 1993 draft. Within two years, the right was busy making even more history, zooming his way up the ranks of the Astros' farm system about as quickly as one of his patented fastballs covers 90 feet. Life, it seemed, was finally done dogging Billy Wagner around. But as quick as a flash, he was thrown another curveball.

#### AN UNTHINKABLE BLOW

On May 16, 1995, his wife's parents were brutally murdered, shooting victims at the crazed hands of another of their son-in-laws following an elongated dispute with his wife. With a tumult of emotions bubbling inside him, Wagner somehow found a way to remain calm through all his pain and the impending trial, making it that much easier

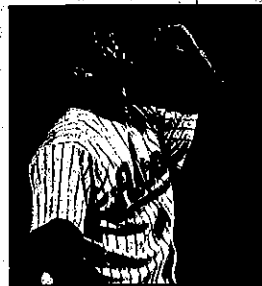
for those around him to seek a much-needed route to recovery.

"Billy's not one to sit around and complain about anything he's had to deal with," says Robinson. "Yes, some of those things have made him sad, but they've also made him stronger and more committed to the things and people he cares about."

#### FROM HEARTACHE TO HEROICS

It's often been said of heart-wrenching times that those that don't kill us ultimately serve to make us stronger. Now, as a testament to that prophecy, 35-year-old Billy Wagner stands before Mets fans as arguably the most poised and gifted closer in all the game.

That inability to be shaken will no doubt move Mets skipper Willie Randolph to make many treks to the mound to hand his team's fortunes over to Wagner, knowing nerves will never be an issue. Playing baseball, even in a white-hot, high-stakes city such as New York, couldn't possibly call for the same level of resolve that



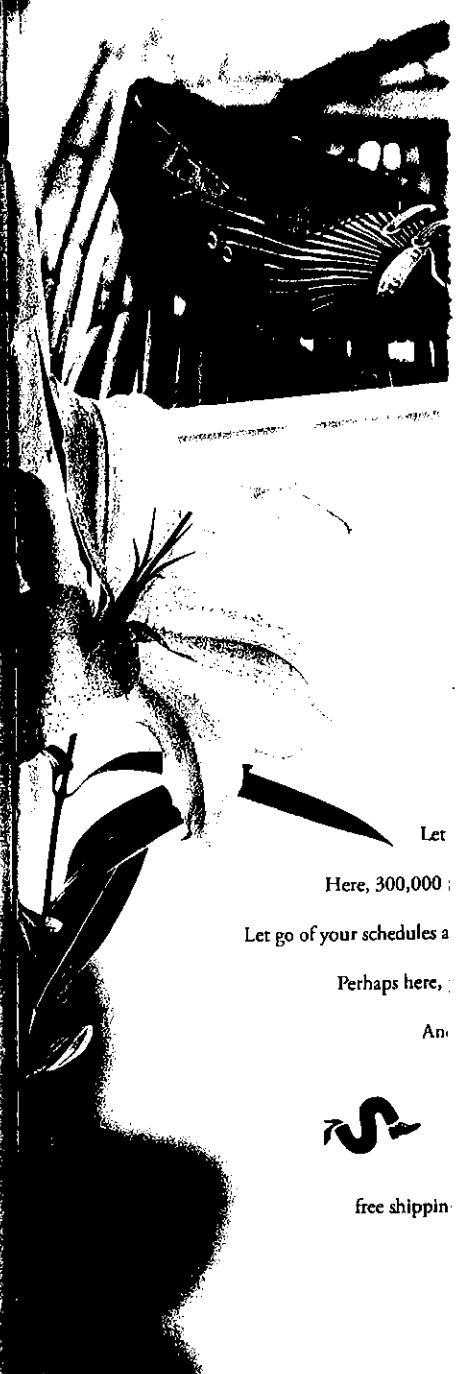
Wagner while still with Houston, who drafted him in 1993.

he's had to muster in his personal life.

"Sports has always been like an oasis for Billy," reminds Robinson. "When things got really tough he'd head for the fields. And when he got there, he worked harder than anyone there."

Glenn Minnik is a contributing writer to New York Resident. Please send responses to Editor in Chief, Kenny Hertzog at [kennyh@resident.com](mailto:kennyh@resident.com).

### baseball



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