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At Iowa, Harmon Makes Offense Go

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IOWA CITY — Ronnie Harmon, on his way to football practice at Iowa, met the assistant sports information director, Phil Haddy. They nodded greetings and then Harmon, the ace running back from Bayside High School in Queens, whirled and said, "Hey, Phil, I'm 6 feet, you know, not 5-11."

Haddy looked bewildered. Harmon explained that he had watched replays of a recent Iowa game on a videotape cassette, and that on the telecast he had been described as 5-11.

"Well, I'll see what I can do, Ronnie," Haddy said.

"O.K., thanks, no big deal," Harmon said, and walked on. Then he stopped and turned again. "But it really is 6 feet," he said.

It was the first reported case this season of anyone selling Ronnie Harmon short. At 6 feet and 196 pounds, he possesses the power and panache to play the part of that rara avis, the game-breaker.

Coach Earle Bruce of Ohio State, who once recruited Harmon, called him "one of the biggest-play guys in college football." Coach Hayden Fry of Iowa called Harmon "the most gifted athlete I've ever been associated with."

191 Yards Against Illinois

In Iowa's 21-16 victory over Illinois Sept. 29, Harmon gained a career-high of 191 yards in 28 carries, and scored all 3 Hawkeye touchdowns. Against Northwestern last Saturday, he rushed for 121 yards on 24 carries and scored 3 touchdowns. Through 5 games, Harmon has 577 yards rushing and 225 yards on pass receptions.

Such is Harmon's explosiveness that the Iowa staff has set a minimum number of times he must touch the ball on offense during a game.

Fry would not divulge the number, but said, "If teams ran the single wing, like in my day, we could feature him a lot more. He can do so many things."

Football-Playing Brothers

Harmon, a junior who played wingback for two seasons, studies his football-playing brothers for running tips.

"Greg has the power I look at," Ronnie said of one brother, playing semipro with the Brooklyn Kings.

"Derrick, he's quick, fast," Harmon said of another brother, a former star running back at Cornell now with the San Francisco 49ers.

"And Kevin, he's got this spin move I'm trying to get," Harmon said of the last brother, a reserve freshman quarterback at Iowa. "I tell him he'll get killed one day if he keeps trying it all the time, but he doesn't listen."

Greg, 23 years old, is the oldest



Ronnie Harmon carrying for Iowa in the Hawkeyes' 21-16 victory over Illinois on Sept. 29. He scored all three of his team's touchdowns.

Harmon brother, followed by Gary, 22, the musically inclined nonathlete of the family, and then Derrick, 21, Ronnie, 20, and Kevin, who will be 19 on Oct. 26.

The boys grew up in a two-story brick home in Laurelton, Queens. Their mother, Jacqueline, cooked steaming pots of meats and vegetables and spaghetti. Pancakes were a breakfast staple. "The boys would eat 10 — each," she said.

Family of Athletes

The boys' father, Jesse, works in a welding shop in Queens. He competed in basketball and track in high school in New York, but not in football, because the school didn't offer it.

Greg took up the sport at age 6, in Pop Warner-type leagues, and his brothers, except Gary, followed his lead through high school at Bayside.

Ronnie started all three years at Bayside (1979-81), and the school won city titles all three years. As a sophomore, Ronnie played defensive back; as a junior wingback and defensive back, and as a senior halfback and defensive back.

Ronnie never had the chance, of course, to play on the same Bayside team with all three of his brothers, but he did play on teams with one or two of them as teammates. He spent two years in the same backfield with brother Kevin at quarterback.

Said Kevin: "We'd be in the huddle, and I'd just made a bad play or

something, and Ronnie'd say, 'Can't you do no better than that? Wait till I get you home.' I didn't say anything back. How could I? I had to call the next play."

Gained 1,218 Yards as Senior

In his senior year, Ronnie Harmon ran for 1,218 yards, averaging almost 10 yards a carry; caught passes for 394 more yards, and made 6 interceptions, running one back 85 yards for a touchdown. He scored 16 touchdowns in all.

But figures were mere underscorings of his grace on the field. Tony Yacovone, who coached Harmon at Bayside and is still at the school, said, "Ronnie might only gain five yards on a run, but it would be the most exciting five yards you'd ever seen. Of course, he was just as likely to gain 50, and those would be exciting, too.

"He had such talent and determination. If we needed a first down, we'd give it to Ronnie, and he'd get it. Things weren't going our way, we'd give it to Ronnie, and we'd come out shiny."

Many of the major colleges wanted Harmon, including Penn State, Ohio State, Michigan, Syracuse and Maryland. He chose Iowa partly because he felt close to Bernie Wyatt, an Iowa assistant coach and native New Yorker who recruited him.

Also, Harmon said, "It was a program on the rise, starting to go to bowls. I thought I could play. At Michigan, I didn't know if I could

start as soon."

On the field and off, Ronnie Harmon has had to adjust at Iowa. Recruited as a running back, he played at wingback his first two seasons (1982 and 1983). Fry needed Harmon's speed on the flanks, and Iowa was already steeped in talented running backs.

Harmon said publicly before the start of last season that he wanted to play running back and would rather be redshirted than play wingback again.

"We had other guys, seniors then, who were ahead of him, and we asked him to play wingback," Fry said. As for redshirting, Fry did not want Harmon's talents wasted on the sidelines.

Harmon finally got his wish this season, moving to running back, where Fry said, he would remain.

Fry called Harmon "opinionated, an individualist." He added, "He won't let anyone buffalo him, and I admire him for it. I'm the same way. We had a disagreement, but only one, about where he lined up."

Deals With Reality

Said Harmon: "I tell the truth, and I face reality real quick. If I can't do something, I can accept it. But if I can, all I want is a good chance to try to do it."

Harmon showed the same willfulness in high school. Because of that, Yacovone passed him over as captain his senior year at Bayside. "I wanted to knock him down a peg," Yacovone said, but admitted it was a mistake.

In Iowa City (population 50,000), Harmon, who is black, is part of a 4 percent minority population. He said he had encountered few, if any, racial problems and added that "some of it may be because I'm an athlete here."

The homage paid Hawkeye athletes, in Iowa City and throughout the state, still astonishes Harmon. The first time he was besieged for his autograph in Iowa City, he called home in disbelief, his mother said.

At Ease With Attention

Now, though, Harmon is at ease with the attention, as he was at a recent autograph-signing session in a shopping center.

"Oh, you're as old as I am," Harmon said to a 13-year-old girl who held out paper and pencil. She blushed. "Just kidding. Don't take it personal," he said, laughing.

No sooner had Harmon penciled his autograph than the girl turned, wanting him to sign the back of her T-shirt.

"You really want me to sign this?" he said.

The girl insisted she did and grinned. On her right shoulder blade he wrote, "Ronnie Harmon. 31."