

THE HEARTLAND HEROES BRED IN QUEENS

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THE goalpost was gopin to come down as surely as a football had just passed between its uprights, an official's gun had signaled the end of the game, and the Iowa Hawkeyes had beaten Michigan to preserve the top ranking in the nation. The state of Iowa was shaking with joy. The north end of Kinnick Stadium was an epicenter of gold and black, the core made up of football players and the rest a mass of students and fans. The circle was growing with each second, spreading from sideline to sideline, and very soon, without any doubt, the north goalpost would be swallowed.

Before that could happen, Ronnie Harmon fled.

Three years ago, when he was a freshman from a place where football games hardly command a prominent place in the social life of a high school, Harmon stopped to watch an Iowa goalpost fall. He had grown up in New York, but he had never seen anything like Iowa City on a football Saturday. "People were just going crazy," he said then. "I mean, wow. I never saw so many people in my life."

Now, three years later, in his senior season, he gets out of their way. "I didn't know I was going to be the No. 1 tailback on the No. 1 team in the nation," Harmon said last week. "It just happened."

Four of the five brothers of the Harmon family from Laurelton, Queens, played football at Bayside High School, and all four have continued their football careers. Football had been a family project going back to the Sunday morning games even before high school, when their father would wash their uniforms and their mother would make dinner.

For three of the four, football is no longer an extra-curricular activity. Greg, the oldest at 24, plays for a semipro team in

Brooklyn. Derrick, who at one time rejected the football establishment and considered giving up the sport to concentrate on studies at Cornell, plays for the San Francisco 49ers and became the host of the family reunion last January when the 49ers reached the Super Bowl.

Ronnie and Kevin, the Hawkeye tailbacks, hope to be hosts for the next reunion in Pasadena on New Year's Day. They joined a growing number of eastern players to become Hawkeyes, making a decision that went against the grain of the philosophy of many New York City programs. The thinking at many city schools, including Bayside, was that a player's future is more secure at a smaller school, closer to home, than at a place half a continent away where his name occupies the ninth spot on some depth chart. Even some exceptional talents have been advised to seek small ponds.

The youngest Harmons, Ronnie and Kevin, had another idea. They just had no idea of the size of this pond. Black and gold mesh replicas of Ronnie's jersey, No. 31, rest on hangars in sporting good stores, available for \$29.99. Minicams form semicircles around him on Saturday afternoons and record his thoughts. The telephone in their dormitory apartment is attached to an answering machine, which is often turned on when they are home to screen telephone calls. Women approach them, and smile, and make small talk.

Ronnie Harmon has gained 826 yards in Iowa's first eight games. He has also gained a greater sense of identity while operating within an industry that does not always encourage that. And he says the attention makes him feel uncomfortable. "I stay away from it," he said, "so I can stay the person that I am. If I do go out, I don't say too much. I guess I'm scared of changing. I don't want to change. I want to stay who I am. If you're exposed to a lot of what's going on on a college campus, it can affect you. I don't want to let it affect me."

He says he just wants to do his job. "I didn't say, 'I'm here just to play football,'" Ronnie said. "I'm here to play football and go to school, but it's going to be a business. You've got to spend your time wisely. You've got to study. You've got to think like you're a business person working on the job. It's just got to be that way. "Football got you out here, but school is going to keep you here. You fail, then you're out. It's a business. You can't do one without the other. You can't work without getting paid. You've got to work to get paid. We're working, and we're getting paid."

He meant they were compensated with an education. "A free education," Kevin said. "You're not given any free education," Ronnie said. "I don't think you're given anything free. Nobody gives you anything free. Just because you play football doesn't mean they're giving you school for free. If you don't play football, then you can't go to school. So what are they giving you free? You're working on the job. You go there, play football, that's your job. A lot of people don't understand, that's your job right there. Without that job, you have no school. To say that's free, that's crazy." "He's a competitor," Derrick said by phone from his home in the Bay area. "What he wants most is production on game day. What goes on in between is not of extreme importance to him. He loves the challenge. That's what keeps him alive. He's realized that part of his character, to be able to say, 'This might interfere with what I am.' "

Derrick could appreciate the value of taking a stand. Because among the football-playing members of the Harmon household, he took the first one.

Kevin remembered being outraged when his brother decided to quit. Kevin was about to start his freshman year at Bayside when Derrick, a sophomore at Cornell majoring in electrical engineering, decided that football was occupying too much of his time. Early on, Derrick was not happy with the football business -the way recruiters would drag him out of classes at Bayside during the day and sit in his family's home late at night. "Football doesn't rate that high on my priority chart," Derrick said three years ago, during his senior season at Cornell. He had been a quarterback at Bayside but insisted on playing running back in college because the demands on his time were not so great.

Still, he felt a struggle for his mind between athletics and academics. Derrick felt the Cornell practice schedule limited his academic growth. "I'd see these exciting classes in engineering," he remembered, "and I couldn't take them."

At the start of his sophomore year, for the first seven days of practice, Derrick stayed home. His younger brothers were not talking to him. "I looked up to him," Kevin said. "He wasn't just my brother, he was a person I looked up to. Because he can do both things. Not too many people can do both things. He had that little extra something that most people don't have. He had that extra stuff to achieve in both, to put the time in. He had a desire to achieve. You can't buy that. You've got to have it."

Finally, Derrick approached them and asked for their opinions.

"They believed that with success in both I could begin to see growth in both," Derrick said. "I could see how there was some truth in that. I did better during the football season than I did during the offseason."

"He said he went back to prove to us that you can do both," Kevin said. "You can do well in school and also do well on the football field. I guess he was right, too, because it worked."

"Maybe," Ronnie wondered out loud, "he had to prove to himself that he could do both. Maybe he wasn't letting us down. Maybe he was letting himself down. Look at him now!"

That was actually Derrick's second stand. The first one was the decision to attend Cornell, over Syracuse and Rutgers. "I didn't know how important academics was to him when he made that decision," Kevin said. "I saw what was his first priority. School was. Football was second. A big second. I guess when he played at Cornell, and more and more he got a chance to play and got looked at by scouts, he felt he could have both. He could have his dream. I'll bet his dream was to play pro football. Everybody's dream is to play pro football, if you play football!"

Derrick wanted to play running back because he needed the extra time to study. Ronnie wanted to play running back for a different reason. "He wants to get his hands on the ball," Bernie Wyatt said.

Wyatt is an Iowa assistant coach who was born in Brooklyn, became a high school star in Amityville, L.I., and has attracted high school talent to the heartland. His pitch consists of a more relaxed existence in a place that possesses the excitement of a large college town, the cultural attractions of a city, the academic opportunities of a major university and a warm sense of community that is not ordinarily found on subway platforms.

Which is all very nice, but it is not what Ronnie Harmon wanted to hear. He wanted to hear about playing running back. During his senior year in high school, in which he gained 1,218 yards, one recruiting visit to Iowa City was all Ronnie needed to see. He went home, picked up a telephone, and dialed the number of a Syracuse assistant to say he was on his way to Syracuse. But the line was busy, and Ronnie reconsidered. Iowa had said the magic words -

running back. He also realized that his sense of purpose would be helped there because he would have fewer friends there, fewer parties, fewer distractions.

Everyone was happy until the day at practice when Ronnie Harmon was caught catching footballs.

He was so good that Hayden Fry, the head coach, felt Harmon could start at wingback. The freshman was brought to the coach's office, where he was asked to consider becoming a wingback. "I knew what was going on," Ronnie said. "I wasn't naive at all."

He went to Wyatt, who had said he would be a tailback. There was nothing Wyatt could do. Eventually, Ronnie came to realize that the move created an earlier opportunity to play, added to his skills, and increased his worth to professional teams. At the time, the freshman was furious. And the helplessness of the assistant coach who had promised him the chance to play tailback helped intensify Harmon's already-businesslike approach.

"He said he couldn't do anything for me," Ronnie said. "That hurt me. From that day, I knew you have to be your own person. You can't turn to anybody, because they can't help you. The guy that recruits you tells you he can't help you. Now what do you do? You're out here by yourself. I said, 'Fine. I'll make it by myself.' "

Last season, the tailback position became available and was finally his. He gained 907 yards and was voted most valuable player by his teammates despite missing the last four games with a broken leg.

Nevertheless, Ronnie's pragmatic approach to his business has resulted in a few public relations problems.

"That's why people think I have a bad attitude," he said. "I've come to the point where I want to do what's right for me. I think coming out of New York, you've got to be an individual. Coming out here, there's a lot of people that hang in a group. If you hang in a group in New York, you'll never accomplish anything. You've got to make your mistakes and learn from them. I'm not scared to take chances. My chance was coming out here."

There are indications that off the field the Harmons are respected but not necessarily admired. A recent story in The Daily Iowan dealt with the idea of placing college athletes on a payroll. An argument against it was built in part on the description of the Harmon brothers, dressed in their New York-bought leather outfits, rolling around town on their motor scooters. Ronnie emerged after the Michigan game in a black leather jacket, leather pants, gold chains and large wraparound sunglasses that he wears day and night.

"I wear my glasses all the time," Ronnie said. "I would never wear my glasses in New York. What for? Here, everybody's basically wearing the same thing. Let's all of us go down and get the same thing. Now, if you wear something different, you can't be in with the group. I don't want to be in with a group. I want to be me. I want to be an individual. I want to be Ronnie, whatever Ronnie is."

This sense of fashion may not attract a second glance on Eighth Street in Greenwich Village, but it is not unnoticed in downtown Iowan City.

"They figure you come from New York, they figure you don't have any parents," Ronnie said. "That's terrible. You can't have anything. Especially that we're black, too, coming out of New York. It is predominantly white in the West. You're not supposed to dress this way, you're not supposed to have certain things that other people would have. That's kind of sad. That's O.K. They can think that way!"

The brothers have different views on the value of life here. "You enjoy life when it's this slow," Kevin said. "You have time to think about things that you wouldn't have in New York."

"It made me appreciate New York more," Ronnie said. "I don't take things for granted anymore."

The two were sitting in a fast-food place downtown when two young women approached. Ronnie stood up to talk, while Kevin sat back and smiled. Ronnie's repartee was punctuated by a high-pitched cackle. One of the women was not amused.

"Why are you looking at me like I'm crazy?" Ronnie finally asked.

"You just think you're so cool," she said.

He said goodbye and wished her a nice day. She pushed the door open and went out into the night.

"See that?" Ronnie Harmon said.

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