

SPORTS

Hawkeyes' Harmon Brings Life to Iowa and Iowa to Life : When He Left New York, Tailback Took a Bit of Broadway With Him

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IOWA CITY — A few weeks ago, at the University of Iowa football banquet, star tailback **Ronnie Harmon** grabbed center stage again and refused to relinquish it. No one knew it at the time, but **Harmon's** one-man, off-Broadway show was about to open in **Iowa** City, and wasn't it nice that the folks around here were lucky enough to see it.

Dressed in red leather shoes, black leather pants and jacket and Yoko Ono-like, wrap-around sunglasses, **Harmon** and his dancing shoes cut a path across the stage that didn't stop until he reached the other side.

Banquet organizers scrambled to see if **Harmon's** act was listed on the program. It wasn't.

"That's just **Ronnie**, **Iowa** assistant coach Bernie Wyatt explained. "The people went crazy. I don't know if another guy can get away with that."

Yes, sometimes you look the other way when the dancer's legs also carry with them **Iowa's** Rose Bowl dream.

Let's just say that **Ronnie Harmon** is a bit different. At least, he is to most **Iowans**. This pretty much is a true-to-life Green Acres story about a New York City kid who woke up one morning and found himself on a farm holding a pitchfork. You imagine **Harmon** screaming to **Iowa**: "Darling, I love you, but give me Park Avenue."

Harmon hails from Laurelton, a suburb of Queens, N.Y., so when he says "I *Thuuuuvatt*," know that he really means, "I thought."

In street clothes, **Harmon** is a blur of clashing shades of leather and dangling chains of gold.

"I like to go out," he said. "I go to clubs, discos. I go to anything that's open at three o'clock in the morning."

So, of course, he ends up in **Iowa**, far from the land of silk and money, where some people have the *alarm* set for three in the morning.

Iowa hit **Harmon** like a Valium overdose.

"I think I came here on purpose," **Harmon** said last week before the **Hawkeyes** left for California and the Rose Bowl. "When I first got out here, sometimes I'd say, 'Why did I do this?' Well, there are some things you have to sacrifice to be better off in the end. It's like being a boxer and going into training. You just go out and get away from things for a while and get in that top condition. That's just like coming here. I want to do something really good when I get out of here."

This was more than a four-year scholarship for **Harmon**. It was a four-year sociology test, pitting city boy versus farm boy, liberal against conservative. **Harmon** came to **Iowa** to grow up, he said, to see others who were different than he was.

Of course, he also came because his friends begged him to stay home and attend nearby Syracuse.

That's **Ronnie Harmon**.

In all his inner-city splendor, **Harmon** is an oddity in **Iowa**.

"A lot of people don't understand him, no question," said Wyatt, a native New Yorker who recruited **Harmon**. "Of course, we don't understand a lot of your movie actors. I think if you take great people, you'll find they are different. That's why they're great. But he does those things because it's him. He does not try to impersonate people. He's going to do what he wants to do."

It's an attitude **Harmon** carries in life and when he breaks out of a huddle. You may not have heard much of **Ronnie Harmon**, the running back. Funny how elusive fame can be when you share the backfield with All-American, headline-hogging quarterback Chuck Long. But **Harmon's** name may pop up again somewhere in the first round of next year's NFL draft.

Last year, a broken leg in November left him in a cast for **Iowa's** win in the Freedom Bowl. This year, he was almost split too thin to be a Heisman Trophy candidate. He had 1,173 yards rushing in only 209 attempts and had nearly 600 yards receiving.

But, as Wyatt says, film doesn't lie. Wait until the pro scouts get hold of this stuff.

"**Ronnie** can literally be surrounded by people and get out of it somehow," Wyatt said. "We watch film and we can't believe what we see sometimes. Really. . . . He believes he's supposed to score a touchdown every time he touches the ball."

He plays the game as if lost in a New York minute. He zigs and zags much the way you would through Times Square at rush hour—darting, dashing, cursing. When he sees a linebacker, he just pretends he's side-stepping a taxi.

"I run pretty close to the person I am," **Harmon** said.

He is, not surprisingly, Wyatt's Mona Lisa. Wyatt says he's the finest athlete he's ever recruited to **Iowa**, better than current NFL players Andre Tippett and Owen Gill, not exactly slouches. Wyatt first spotted **Harmon** as junior back at Bayside High in Laurelton. Now it wasn't as though **Harmon** was overlooked. He comes from a healthy and steady line of football stock. **Harmon's** older brother, Derrick, plays for San Francisco 49ers. His younger brother Kevin, followed **Ronnie** to **Iowa** and is the **Hawkeyes'** backup tailback.

But, until recently, not many colleges recruited in New York's inner-city schools.

"Some people are afraid to go into the city and recruit," Wyatt said.

Wyatt, who was born in Brooklyn, wasn't afraid. He knows the city and speaks the language. Eighteen players on **Iowa's** roster are from the New York area. Or, as **Iowa** Coach Hayden Fry would say, "Thank you, coach Wyatt."

And, believe it or not, **Iowa** is not as difficult a sell as you might think.

Fry remembers how he landed former **Iowa** fullback, Norm Granger, from Newark, N.J.

Now Granger, who was drafted by the Dallas Cowboys, was being wooed by every major college around. But after his first visit to the state, Granger stuck out his hand and told Fry he was coming to **Iowa**.

"I nearly passed out," Fry said. "I couldn't believe it. I asked him what had entered his decision making. And he said, 'Coach, you know that football player you had showing me around campus? Well, I slipped away from him for a couple of hours and went downtown on my own. I went into five or six different stores down there and they didn't even watch me.'"

Fry again: "I really had to think about what he meant. . . . but I thought, back home, the house detective would have probably thought he was stealing something. He was so happy that someone trusted him."

Granger also toured the town with an academic professor and was impressed that there was never a need to lock the door when they got out of his car.

For some, **Iowa** is a breath of fresh air—a Shangri-La surrounded by picket fences.

New York kids come to **Iowa** and find a whole different world.

"In New York, you just don't go up to strangers," Wyatt said. "You become non-involved. The thing that impresses the kids about **Iowa** is that they can walk down the street here and people will say hello to them or 'excuse me' if someone bumps into them."

And that's sort of why **Ronnie Harmon** came to **Iowa**. Sort of because, well, as we said, **Harmon** is a bit different.

While he enjoyed the tranquility of the plains, he had no intention of leaving New York behind. Instead, he brought part of the city with him.

So, naturally, considering his wardrobe, he gets his share of strange looks when he walks through town. But no more than a farmer in overhauls would get walking down Madison Avenue, he says.

Harmon refuses to change for the sake of others.

"If they can't accept me for what I am, they shouldn't accept me at all," he said. "A lot of people in New York would tell you that I'm not just doing this for show. That's the way I grew up. That's the way I was born. I can't change. I'm not going to change."

Did it take awhile for people to adjust to you?

"I don't know," **Harmon** said. "I didn't ask."

Being a football star in a small town gives **Harmon** some freedom.

Like Wyatt said earlier about his dance at the awards banquet, "I don't know if another guy can get away with that."

Still, **Harmon** had to find some things out the hard way. He said he doesn't go out much in **Iowa** City anymore.

"I was a very quick-moving person in New York," **Harmon** said. "I was never home. I was always out, going, going, going. We'd do the wildest things. You don't want to hear about that. I was always moving, moving, moving. When I come back here it's like a walking pace."

But some people didn't take too kindly to **Harmon's** style in **Iowa** City, he said.

"When you go out here there's a lot of people who look at you and try to bother you," **Harmon** said. "It happened quite a few times. They try to impress the people they're with. They want to test you. You've got to put up with a lot of things that I normally wouldn't put up with in New York."

Harmon had to use restraint.

"Here," **Harmon** said, "you get in a fight and you go to jail. In New York, you get in a fight and well, that's just the way it is."

For **Harmon**, living in **Iowa** has been a test of will. He hasn't been home for Christmas in four years. There were easier roads to take to the Rose Bowl, but **Harmon** chose the one less traveled.

"This was a big transition for me," he said. "And that's good. Because you learn. You've got to have a lot of patience and tolerance. . . . A lot of people don't know what to say to me because I look so different. That's just the way it is. That's why I admire a lot of singers and entertainers because they have strong minds to do what they want. You can't let people distract you and pull you off the course that you've set for yourself. I'm not saying that I'm a star. I'm saying that I'm different and that most stars are different. I've got a lot of ideas about a lot of things. I like the way I am."

When **Harmon** was in high school deciding between Syracuse and **Iowa**, a friend's father chided him for wanting to go to a place where there seemed to be little but corn fields.

That was enough for **Harmon**.

"He didn't know any more about the place than I did," **Harmon** said. "Still, he was talking about it. I just said, if I fail, then fine. A lot of people are afraid to fail. I'm not afraid to fail, that's the reason I came out here. In New York, no one thinks of **Iowa**. I had never heard of **Iowa**. But life is full of chances that you must take."

It's not a philosophy suggested for everyone. Then again, not everyone wears red leather shoes and sunglasses at night. And not everyone can spin a linebacker into the ground with the slightest juke of a shoulder. But that's **Ronnie Harmon**.

'A lot of people are afraid to fail. I'm not afraid to fail, that's the reason I came out here. In New York, no one thinks of **Iowa**. I had never heard of **Iowa**. But life is full of chances that you must take.'-RONNIE HARMON

Chris Dufresne

Chris Dufresne was the Los Angeles Times' national college football/basketball columnist from 1995 to 2015. He also covered skiing at the Winter Olympics and wrote extensively on most sports. He is a multiple national award winner and was named 2011 California Sportswriter of the Year by the National Sportswriters and Sportscasters Assn. A Los Angeles native, he started at The Times in 1976 as a truck loader and literally worked his way up (two floors to be exact).