

SPORTS

Harmon Dodges Accolades as Effectively as Tacklers

BY DAVE MCKIBBEN
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SAN DIEGO — **Ronnie Harmon** cringes at the sight of a reporter walking toward his locker. Fortunately, he treats reporters better than defensive players who make their living trying to tackle him.

But he stays and chats, all the while looking for a crease so he can dart up-field and out of the locker room, onto more comfortable terrain, the football field.

But these days, interviews are slightly less painful to **Harmon**. He dances around fewer questions, and his answers are longer and more flowing.

Harmon is in the flow for good reason. He has caught more passes (72) for more yards (841) this season than any running back in the NFL. Only four players in the AFC have more total yards from scrimmage (1,048) than **Harmon**.

He won't admit it, but **Harmon** is probably having the best season of his seven-year career.

"I don't consider any year a good year," **Harmon** said.

And certainly not a Pro Bowl year, right?

"I knew you were going to ask me about that," **Harmon** said with a laugh and a moan. "That's OK, I'll just go back to the cold of New York.

"I don't care. You have to start to go there. I don't start. If you look on your sheet, I am a sub.

"It won't matter to me. I've learned there's a lot more to worry about than getting involved in that sort of thing. That's scenery."

Maybe so, but his teammates say **Harmon** deserves to be a part of that scenery this year.

"If he doesn't go to the Pro Bowl, nobody deserves going," guard David Richards said.

"You catch 72 passes and are third in the league in receptions, how could you not go?" running back Rod Bernstine said.

"It can happen," said Charger cornerback Gill Byrd, who made his first Pro Bowl appearance last year after nine years in the NFL. "I think this is the first year it's going to happen. That would make me the happiest of anybody to see **Ronnie** go."

Tight end Duane Young takes praising **Harmon** to another level.

"He's the best player in the NFL," Young said. "He should always be in the Pro Bowl. He's the best player, hands down. Nobody can do the things he can—running, catching, blocking. He's by far the most valuable player on our team."

If **Harmon** wins the award this year, it will be his second consecutive team MVP. But honors have always been difficult for **Harmon** to accept.

"It's very hard to talk about myself, because it's not all about me," he said. "It's about everybody in here."

You don't even care that your teammates respect you?

"I respect them," **Harmon** said. "I think everybody respects everybody in here. I think that's why we get along so well."

General Manager Bobby Beathard said it's hard to imagine someone not getting along with **Harmon**.

"He's got that great smile," Beathard said. "He's funny. He's just a great guy. He's real. He's sincere."

But apparently the Buffalo Bills' organization wasn't nearly as fond of **Harmon**.

"We got that sense when he was left unprotected," Beathard said.

After four seasons in Buffalo, **Harmon** joined the Chargers in 1990. Beathard said he was curious why Buffalo let him go, so he asked then-Charger offensive coordinator Ted Tollner, who had been in Buffalo with **Harmon**.

"He said he never had any problems with **Ronnie**," Beathard said. "That was good enough for me.

"From the day we met him, he's been terrific. He's such a worker and he sets a great example for his teammates. He minds his own business and he never seems to take anything for granted."

In Buffalo, **Harmon** said, he couldn't afford to take anything for granted, especially his happiness. In fact, **Harmon's** ever-present smile suddenly leaves his face when the word "Buffalo" comes up in conversation.

"I don't think there's any animosity among players here at all, and that's a good feeling," **Harmon** said. "Speaking where I came from, it's great here. Still today, that might be the same situation in Buffalo. There was a lot of animosity in there. I think that made me mature a whole lot."

Charger punter John Kidd, who was with **Harmon** in Buffalo, said **Harmon** became a scapegoat for the Bills' misfortunes.

"When he first came to Buffalo, we didn't have a very good team," Kidd said. "He had a lot of pressure to be good right away because he was a No. 1 draft choice (from Iowa). He didn't play right away. He wasn't the featured back, and then there was the play in Cleveland."

On that play in the 1989 playoffs, **Harmon** dropped an almost certain touchdown pass against the Browns that would have given the Bills a victory.

"**Ronnie** didn't like the media attention anyway, and most of what he was getting was negative," Kidd said. "They already had Thurman Thomas and that made it easier for them to get rid of **Ronnie**. But he was given a clean slate here. Both of us like it here."

Harmon likes it, but he won't lie. He could be happier.

"If I could run the ball, maybe I'd feel a little bit better about myself, but I don't," **Harmon** said. "A running back wants to run the ball. You can go to any running back and ask him what he'd rather do. He'll tell you, 'Run the ball.' That's why you're a running back.

"I'm not a receiver. It's just part of the job. Everybody categorizes me as a receiver. I'm stuck between a hard place and a rock. And a rock is a rock, so what can you do?"

Nothing. So he accepts his role, even if it means he averages only three carries a game. **Harmon** has rushed 44 times for 207 yards and two touchdowns.

"I've reconciled a lot," **Harmon** said. "I've gotten older. You learn to deal with situations that may not be good for yourself, but you learn to deal with it and go on with life. It's just part of life."

At 28, **Harmon** appears to be at peace with his career.

"I realize things are going to be the way they are," he said. "I guess when you're young, you concentrate more on what they're doing with you than what you should be doing. There comes a point in time when you have to think about what you're doing and not what they're doing with you."

What Charger Coach Bobby Ross is doing with **Harmon** has created headaches for opponents. He has put **Harmon** at wide receiver, H-back and running back in a two-back set with Bernstine or Marion Butts. Opponents are liable to see **Harmon** on first, second or third down.

Under former Charger Coach Dan Henning, **Harmon** was used almost exclusively in passing situations.

Harmon now flourishes.

"When everybody else on the team does their job, they can't do anything about me," he said. "Good people around you make everybody good. Everybody gets a chance to show their stuff one on one. I don't think anything should be about me. It should be about the team. The only way you can get better is by your team getting better. That's what has happened."

If that's true, then **Harmon** has been at his best lately. Each week he seems to come up with a more surreal run than the one before.

Ross said **Harmon's** run and after a reception last week against the Bengals might have been his best yet.

"I was showing it to the players on film," Ross said. "He had three players surrounding him and sideline on the other side of him and somehow, he got away. He can do a 90-degree cut on a dime. There's not too many people that are going to get him one on one."

Young said there aren't any.

"If there's two guys out there trying to tackle **Ronnie**, he's going to make the first guy miss," Young said. "Then, after that, he'll make three guys miss. I've seen him make a whole team miss. He'll just make people look silly."

Butts runs people over. Bernstine runs over and around them. Eric Bienenmy hides behind them and goes underneath them. And **Harmon** makes them look silly.

How do they all fit into a one-back offense?

"Everybody has their own qualities," **Harmon** said. "That just makes us better as a group. We look at each other and say, 'That's nice. That's a good run.'"

"Our group is beyond being competitive with each other. Everybody knows they're going to get their chance to play. When it's your turn, you do what you have to do."

And even though **Harmon's** carries have dropped this year—he had 89 last year—he is showing what needs to be done on the Chargers (9-5).

"It's always nice to win, but sometimes you don't feel really involved because you're not doing as much as you want to help the team win," **Harmon** said. "That's the key for any player. How much he affects the outcome, winning or losing."

According to coaches and teammates, **Harmon** has affected a few outcomes and helped turn around the Chargers' season.

But if you listen to **Harmon**, the Chargers' resurgence is not about him.

"We hung there together," he said. "When we were as bad as we were and didn't cut each other's throats, that showed us we can hang in there through the bad times. It was the team that was zero and four. So now everybody realizes we're in this together. And that's the greatest feeling in the world."

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