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Feature: Did Iowa's Ronnie Harmon Throw The '86 Rose Bowl?

This Saturday marks the 25th anniversary of arguably the biggest individual meltdown in Rose Bowl history. Iowa All-American running back Ronnie Harmon, a sure-handed player who had fumbled the ball just once all season, fumbled the ball four times in the first half and also dropped an easy touchdown pass. To this day, despite countless denials, some fans still believe Harmon threw the '86 Rose Bowl. We look back on the infamous day and examine the cheating allegations that have persisted since then.

In the immediate aftermath of Harmon's four-fumble performance in a 45-28 loss to UCLA, there was no hint by anyone publicly that something was amiss. Like Iowa fans, most people were just in shock that a player as talented as Harmon would have such a major breakdown during such a big game.

said Harmon in the post game press conference: "That was the most I ever fumbled in one game. They did a good job of stripping the ball. I've gotta give them all the credit."

It wasn't until the summer of 1987 that the idea of Harmon possibly throwing the '86 Rose Bowl was floated out. That was because in June of 1987, the NCAA publicly finished an investigation where it determined he had not thrown the '86 Rose Bowl in which Iowa was favored by 2.5 points.

The reason the NCAA even started an investigation was because it was an offshoot of a Chicago federal grand jury probe into alleged dealings between sports agents Norby Walters and Lloyd Bloom and college athletes. Harmon was among several Iowa players implicated for allegedly accepting improper benefits from the agents.

Harmon eventually admitted taking \$50,000 from Walters and Michael Franzese, the man who helped bankrupt Walters and Bloom. That association with the two further fueled the suspicion that Harmon threw the '86 Rose Bowl.


Franzese added more fuel to the fire during a 2002 taping of HBO's "Real Sports" when he came out and said he believed that Harmon threw the game. Franzese made the statement fully admitting he was in prison at the time and that he had no actual proof of this other than the game tapes.

Harmon himself has denied throwing the game for the past quarter century and has given credit to the UCLA defense for making the plays. His coach at the time, Hayden Fry, has been saying the same thing for the past 25 years as well.

When reached at his home in Mesquite, NV, Fry said: "Well we had a formal investigation, I won't tell you which branch of government, but we spent three days with me at my office and we reviewed the films over and over. And one of the gentlemen was an ex-NFL football player and we all agreed that the fumbles were the result of UCLA doing a heckuva job tackling."


Curious to see it for yourself? All four fumbles are available online to be viewed by any suspicious party. Let's examine:

- Harmon's first fumble is the most dubious, as the Hawkeyes were near the goal line when the ball appears to just fly out of the arms of Harmon. Of all the botched plays, this is the most damning one for anyone convinced Harmon threw the Rose Bowl.




• Harmon's other three fumbles are much harder to analyze. The best view of his second fumble is obstructed by a yard marker, but based on close inspection, it's clear UCLA's Melvin Jackson is in the process of pulling on Harmon's carrying arm.

If anything, Harmon's knees might've been down before he even lost the ball but the yard marker obstructs the view. Regardless, this clearly looks like a forced fumble.



• Harmon's third fumble seems odd only in that it doesn't really fit with how Harmon was being tackled. Unlike his second fumble where it's clear how the defender could've caused the fumble, on this play it isn't so obvious. Harmon is being tackled up top yet the ball pops loose as if it had been punched straight down. The defender, Ken Horton, Jr., might have had long arms, but based on the video it doesn't quite make sense. But we're hardly physicists and it's hard to analyze how a ball should come out when a player is being pummeled.





• Harmon's last fumble again doesn't look like a strip, but it's certainly a violent collision, as the defender had his arms wrapped around Harmon's head. Still, this is probably the second most suspicious fumble since it appeared to happen after Harmon had broken the tackle.



• Lastly the dropped pass. For one, Harmon isn't exactly wide open; he just has a step or two on his defender. Secondly, he's trying to essentially make an over-the-shoulder catch. That being said, the ball did hit him in the hands and is a play a college football player, especially of Harmon's caliber, is expected to make.



If that play hadn't been in the shadow of four fumbles, it's just one drop on a day that Harmon had a career-high 11 catches for 102 yards.

So now that you've seen all the clips, what do you think?

In the end, people will see what they want to see in the clips. Some of his fumbles are definitely head scratchers, but if it weren't for the NCAA's investigation following the improper benefits Harmon received, we might not be having this discussion at all. And while the clips look like something out of "Blus Chips," there is still no smoking gun proving Harmon's guilt now 25 years later.

And after all, there will always be conspiracy theorists who say things like Colt McCoy threw last year's BCS Championship Game by faking an injury.

Said Fry from his home this week: "I just feel so sorry for the young man. We even had a Rose Bowl reunion the first game this year and to my knowledge he was right there in Iowa City and didn't even come. He's really hurt by it. He's a great young man."

As those who defend Harmon point out, he wasn't the one that allowed the UCLA offense to light up the scoreboard. Fry said Iowa's real problem was that a Hawkeye defender was accidentally tipping the defense's plays, something a UCLA assistant told Fry years later.

Harmon went on to have a solid professional career, although a **dropped pass that would have sent the Buffalo Bills to the AFC Championship Game in the 1989-90 playoffs** only furthered the speculation that he threw football games. The Bills instead lost to the Browns, 34-30. They were 3.5-point underdogs.

Harmon made his most money with the San Diego Chargers, becoming a quality third-down back in the NFL before retiring after the 1997 season. As the speculation continued to swirl about the '86 Rose Bowl with Harmon in the pros, he isolated himself by rarely speaking with the media. The black visor he wore on his facemask appeared to be symbolic of his shy personality.

Said Harmon toward the end of his career: "If people want to know what type of person I am, I'll sit down and talk as long as they don't personally attack me... I guess I should have defended myself. Maybe by not talking for so long, that made it worse. I just honestly didn't think it was that big of a deal. People who knew me at Iowa, my teammates... (they) knew that wasn't me and that was enough."

He hasn't been heard of much since retiring from the NFL. After coaching high school football in his home state of New York, he served as a running backs coach at FCS school Western Illinois from 2003-05 but was fired under mysterious circumstances.

Now 46, today Harmon resides north of Seattle in Lynnwood, Washington. The debate over whether he threw the '86 Rose Bowl is debated endlessly by sports conspiracy theorists alongside the likes of the **1965 Muhammad Ali-Sonny Liston fight** and the **1985 NBA Draft lottery** and the only person who knows for sure hasn't been heard from publicly in years and may never publicly speak about the game again.



This entry was written by [lost Lettermen](#) posted on 2010-12-28 at 1:02 pm, filed under [Feature](#) and tagged [Featured](#), [Iowa](#). [Bookmark the permalink](#).

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32 Comments

Dave
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

Let it rest.

Dave
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

Let it go...Franzese would have known "positively" were it true and he only said "maybe"
Again, let it go..please.

Hawkeye Nerd
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

UCLA offense didn't score 45. The defense ran one of Harmon's fumbles back for a touchdown.

M.W.
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

"Harmon's third fumble seems odd only in that it doesn't really fit with how Harmon was being tackled. Unlike his second fumble where it's clear how the defender could've caused the fumble, on this play it isn't so obvious. Harmon is being tackled up top yet the ball pops loose as if it had been punched straight down."

It's totally obvious — the tackler's left hand hit the ball!

Penn State Alum
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

Hawkeye Nerd, The defensive TD that you are talking about was called back. You could not advance a fumble in college in 1986.

Anonymous
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

How many of the points were off turnovers?
At least 2 **fumbles** didn't look right.

Shhhh
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

This is old news, as a former hawkeye who was in the program in the 90's, EVERYBODY knew he threw that game. I'm not bitter about it but this is very old. You ask Harmon a question and after you get the answer you smell smoke coming out of his ears.

Brian Theriot
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

Oh, Please. As a former ucla captain and as a father of former ucla fullback Trevor Theriot. Please bring back this ucla staff. Norm chow should go back to USC or be relegated to coaching center snaps only. Butt to hands exchange. All day long. Bring back Donahue. Get bob field back coaching. Raise red sanders hire Ronnie Harmon

Future of Fantasy
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

That last pass drop is pointless in the case against him throwing the game. They were already down 21 at the time, and need 24 points to cover. Unless Harmon was really dumb, he would not have dropped that on purpose.

studakota
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

I'd like to look into the eyes of Mr Nesbitt, the QB from Ga. Tech., when he answers the question: How could you possibly ever throw your receivers by ten yds., at least three times, in your game vs. Kansas this year? Favored by 14 pts to a team which had lost their first game , at home, to North Dakota St. by a 3-6 score , they somehow managed to lose the game. the answer: over 1700- the question: how many offshore bookies are there to take your bet on the above game.

bear
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

This is crazy! And look at the fourth "suspicious" fumble. Watch the defenders feet as he falls away - he kicks the ball loose!

DJ
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

I had a personal discussion with a lineman from that team and asked him what he felt. He said "I'll tell you that when that game was over, Harmon was gone. The rest of the team came back as a group and he got in a car and left". Feel free to fill in the blanks.

Everbody Knows
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

This is not something new...everyone in Iowa City and around the football program at that time remembers Ronnie and his brother Kevin and knows that he threw the game..It has followed him to this day and rumors persist that following his dropped pass in Buffalo Jim Kelly insisted that he be traded.

I guess Hayden does not want this as a legacy of probably one of his greatest teams but clearly Ronnie is not embraced by one of the best and most loyal fan bases in all of college football because it is commonly known that he threw the game.

Anonymous
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

I was there. He threw the game!

Bubba Boudreaux
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

Since Permalink has obvious evidence that the game was thrown from his statements and he has failed to come forward he has continued the obvious conspiracy which is a federal crime with no statute of limitations. FBI arrest Permalink and "convince" him to release the all the names. I am sure he also has information on the following:

The Hoffa murder
The Kennedy Assassination
Location of the Arc
and Where Waldo is

Terry
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

boudreaux...conspiracy as a federal crime has a 5 year statute of limitations. If there were an overt continuance of the conspiracy after that time, that would constitute the beginning of the time limitation. Talking about what you knew does not rise to the level of an overt continuance of the crime.

I would probably behoove you to know the law rather than make erroneous posts regarding the law.

You are now dismissed with prejudice young man!

David
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

Well If your gonna Say Ronnie Threw the football Game then you have one slight problem...The UCLA Offense Did put up 38 points with out the fumble for a TD, Not to mention the percentage of plays that Iowa had that Ronnie was holding the ball and fumbled is small compared to the rest of the available running backs and receivers. The Whole Iowa team did not throw the game and Ronnie was a small part of it. The Iowa Defense was not able to stop UCLA's Offense is more a factor in what happened that day then much about Ronnie throwing the Game! By the way Those "Questionable

►umps in the video are a JUK! Looks pretty clear that ne got nailed by the Defense and Not much more to say about the Game then that!

Schpetz
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

They may have all been hit or stripped, but why was he carrying the ball in the wrong (inside) hand on all four fumbles???? It's what I would do if I wanted to fumble a game away and make it look like I wasn't. Maybe he did this all of the time before...but I doubt it.

Dan
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

I think that Bubba Boudreaux has the best answer

kiket
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

I am really sorry to hear the whole story about Ronnie Harmon. If indeed is a true story, I would come clean and face the music. Carrying a great burden like for your entire life can perhaps cause you a lot of grief for yourself and family. If it is not true tell them its not, and end such a catastrophe because this can carry you an eternaty. End it Ronnie tell the truth and clean it up. The shadow

Jon
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

Really, who cares. This was how long ago? The NCAA is a joke anyways, all I have to say is Cam Newton and Ohio State. Enough said.

Mark
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

Why would he make it so obvious? Iowa was only favored by 2.5 points. I wasn't happy that he had such a terrible day, but I don't believe he threw the game. The other posters that say they know he threw the game and were players in that game use your full name or anyone could say that.

sid
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

I have followed Iowa for over 50 years and was at every home game that Harmon played while he was at Iowa and in my opinion he must have been paid well to play the way he did in the Rose Bowl. I don't believe he ever graduated from Iowa and probably would never have been able to play if it was not for basket weaving class he took. Parading around campus in a fur coat and gold jewelry.

JTL
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

It is clear that he did not throw the game... He is either a very talented actor or those were legit plays. If you watch close enough they all look like a normal fumble that you see almost every football game. He does not just let go of the ball and he doesnt throw towards the defender.

Secret Squirrel
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

Fix!

Luke
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

"I am really sorry to hear the whole story about Ronnie Harmon. If indeed is a true story, I would come clean and face the music. Carrying a great burden like for your entire life can perhaps cause you a lot of grief for yourself and family. If it is not true tell them its not, and end such a catastrophe because this can carry you an eternaty. End it Ronnie tell the truth and clean it up."

This presumes he hasn't already told the truth. Confess, witch!!!

Has Oliver Stone started filming of this story yet?

Luke
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

I am really sorry to hear the whole story about Ronnie Harmon. If indeed is a true story, I would come clean and face the music. Carrying a great burden like for your entire life can perhaps cause you a lot of grief for yourself and family. If it is not true tell them its not, and end such a catastrophe because this can carry you an eternaty. End it Ronnie tell the truth and clean it up. The shadow

Steve Pitall
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

I don't know the truth, and I doubt anyone here does either. Those who say they "know" he threw the game are guilty of false accusations (unless they witnessed the crime itself), which is such a heinous crime as to be specifically mentioned in the ten commandments. Perhaps none of you has ever been falsely accused of a crime, but anyone who has ever been falsely accused will never forget the experience. One cannot prove one's innocence with a denial of the charge. IF Harmon is guilty, I would guess he has punished himself more than any court could have punished him. Anyone who accuses him without proof is just spreading more pain from this sad story. However, the story itself is a wonderful learning opportunity for young and old alike in ethics and karma regardless if any crime was ever committed in the first place.

Phil6
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

Ask former Ohio State qb Art Schlister about throwing games. He even wrote a book about it. The Big 10 was rife with this stuff, being near the Chicago mob and all, hey you could make more in college by throwing games than you could playing pro ball...

John Smith
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

Its a shame but yes he threw the game and he will live with the lie the rest of his life. The Bills should trade him, and yes the NCAA is a joke, Cam Newton is the prime example, his dad is laughing at the way to the bank. Yet we forget he is also a thief, computer stolen in Florida and other indiscretions. Cam Newton has no character or integrity. His dad being a preacher is a joke too. Ohio State gets beat up pretty hard on this comparison, yes they should be suspended but it was their gear they sold, not much a crime there. Maybe hard to wonder why they would sell their own accomplishments and memory's but not really a crime.

Joe
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

Any comment made to vindicate Harmon should fall on deaf ears. He cheated by accepting \$50,000.00. That alone means his word means nothing. If no one believes him now, he brought that response on himself. He has no integrity.

Mark D
Posted at | [Permalink](#)

Of course Ronnie Harmon fixed this game. I was a college kid at the time and we ran a small bookmaking operation on campus. The guy we used to lay off to TOLD ME BEFORE THE GAME THAT IT WAS FIXED...it was a very poorly kept secret if you lived in the New York area. We all made a killing on that game laying off the action on the guys from Philly who didn't seem to know.

2 Trackbacks

By Who believe's Ronnie Harmon got paid... - Page 2 - HawkeyeNation Forum

on at

[...] Here is another article on the matter with video clips of the four fumbles & dropped pass. Feature: Did Iowa's Ronnie Harmon Throw The '86 Rose Bowl? - LostLettermen.com Here is a lengthy piece from SI on the Walters-Bloom matter. I'd forgotten that Chris Carter was [...]

By Who believe's Ronnie Harmon got paid... - Page 3 - HawkeyeNation Forum
on at

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