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# 30 years later, Chuck Long recalls Iowa's storied 1985 season

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Former Iowa quarterback Chuck Long bootlegs around the right side of the line for the winning score against Michigan State at Kinnick Stadium in Iowa City on Oct. 5, 1985. This picture was shot from the stands by Richard Stump of Iowa City.

Editor's note: This is a continuing series of Eastern Iowa sports history "Time Machine" articles. Mark Dukes worked at The Gazette from 1973 to 1998, the last 14 years as sports editor.

By Mark Dukes, correspondent

Even 30 years later, Chuck Long hasn't grown tired of folks asking him about the 1985 Iowa football season. The naked bootleg against Michigan State. The 12-10 victory over Michigan in a No. 1 vs. No. 2 classic. The Heisman Trophy bid. And the Rose Bowl. The season still is very much a benchmark for the Hawkeye program. Three decades have passed but they have not dulled Long's and fans' memories. "Oh no, in fact as time goes on, more and more people want to hear about it, relive those moments, go back in time," Long said this week. "I don't mind sharing that year again with people. I've found that as you get older, more and more people want to relive special moments in their life. What I get now is people telling me where they were at that moment." Long still is held in reverence among Iowa football fans, largely because of the 1985 season. He led the Hawkeyes to a 10-1 regular season record, a No. 1 national ranking, an outright Big Ten championship and a Rose Bowl berth. He was a consensus All-America quarterback and runner-up in the Heisman Trophy balloting. Had today's red-shirt been in place, Long would have been off to the National Football League for the 1985 season. Long had played briefly in the 1981 campaign, including a few mop-up plays in the Rose Bowl, and shined three more years. But he learned he was eligible for another season. In what some fans feared may be his last collegiate game - the 1984 Freedom Bowl against Texas - Long passed for 461 yards and six touchdowns, including four TDs in a 31-point third quarter. It was a game Coach Hayden Fry dearly wanted to win, given his roots. Iowa walloped Texas, 55-17.



"I just wanted to play that game out," Long said. "I had just really found out about the rule after the regular season and before the bowl game. If anyone knew beforehand, they kept it from me. We called that the Hayden Fry Bowl because it was so important to him, and that was our entire focus."

Long said he never considered foregoing that fifth season.

"No, not at all," he said. "After that game, we had two weeks of vacation time and I spent it talking to my family. I knew I was coming back and was just looking for any reason not to. I never found a reason not to come back."

It was a decision Iowa fans celebrated and one Long would not regret. It is believed, because of the red-shirt rule, he is the only college player to appear in five bowl games.

After three lopsided wins to start 1985, Iowa rose to No. 1 in the polls and faced Michigan State at Kinnick Stadium. The Spartans featured running back Lorenzo White, who was on his way to a then-Big Ten record 2,066 yards rushing in '85.

Iowa trailed MSU, 24-13, in the second half and still faced a 31-28 deficit late. The Hawkeyes faced a third-and-1 at the Spartan two-yard line with 31 seconds left.

Long faked a handoff to Ronnie Harmon and set off on a bootleg around the right side, going into the end zone untouched with the ball above his head and into the arms of then-assistant Iowa sports information director Phil Haddy.

"Over the years, it seems like everybody told me they were in that corner when I raised the ball up," Long said. "From everyone I've heard from, it seems like 200,000 people were there at the time."

"There was a lot of sideline banter between me and coach because there wasn't much time and we had no timeouts. Coach said, 'Charlie, I want you to run the isolation play to the left and keep the ball, but don't tell anybody.' I looked at him puzzled and said, 'Coach have you seen me run?' He took his glasses off, and that's when you knew he was getting serious."

"He looked me dead in the eye and said, 'Charlie, do what I want you to do, trust me, we're going to score.' The Michigan State back side corner should have stayed home but he didn't. The old story I tell Rotarys now is that because he blew his assignment, that was one of the few times Nick Saban got beat. He was the defensive coordinator and secondary coach for Michigan State that day."

What followed two weeks later is Iowa lore, a No. 1 vs. No. 2 matchup with Michigan at Kinnick. Iowa linebacker Larry Station leveled Wolverine back Jamie Morris on a critical third-down play, giving Iowa the ball at its 22 with 5:27 remaining. Long engineered a drive that led to Rob Houghtlin's game-winning 29-yard field goal.

No. 8 Ohio State spoiled Iowa's undefeated season with a 22-13 win in Columbus two weeks later, but the Hawkeyes went on to win their final three.

Long was in the Heisman discussion from the start of 1985, having finished No. 7 in the 1984 voting. It was a national debate as to who would win the trophy, Long or Auburn running back Bo Jackson.

Long passed for 2,978 yards and 29 touchdowns. Jackson, despite missing one game, rushed for 1,786 yards and 17 TDs.

Jackson won by 45 points, then the closest vote in Heisman history. Jackson carried the South, Mid-Atlantic and Southwest regions. Long carried the Northeast, Midwest and Far West. In 2009, Mark Ingram of Alabama beat Stanford's Toby Gerhart by 28 points.

"I never thought about winning it until I went down the elevator to the floor where the ceremony was being held," Long said. "I was with (future wife) Lisa in my tuxedo and she said, 'Have you prepared anything?' I said I hadn't prepared anything. She said, 'You may want to think about who you want to thank.' I just enjoyed being in the race. I never thought in my wildest dreams I would win it."

Long's college career closed on a sour note, a 45-28 loss to UCLA in the 1986 Rose Bowl. He chose to decline comment on Harmon's four first-half fumbles and later a dropped pass, calling the loss a bitter team defeat.

"One of the most disappointing things for me was not winning a Rose Bowl for Hayden Fry for as much as he meant to the program and for the state," Long said. "That was his best chance to win it. I wanted that Rose Bowl bad."

"It's one of the regrets I have, and I didn't have many. I'd love to have that one back."

In the 30 years since finishing his Iowa career, Long had a six-year NFL career and embarked on a 16-year coaching career, largely as an assistant. He now is CEO and executive director of the Iowa Sports Foundation, a Big Ten Network analyst and a frequent guest of media across the state.

Chuck, 52, lives in Ankeny. He and his wife, Lisa, have five grown children: Lindsay, 27; Samantha, 25; Nathan 23; Zachary, 21, and Maddy, 18.

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Mark Vlasic was Long's backup and the holder on Rob Houghtlin's game-winning field goal against Michigan.

"What gets lost in all this is that Vlasic stayed and basically was a backup for four years before he got a shot," Long said. "In today's day in age, those guys are leaving. It's one of the better stories. That story is better than mine in many ways, because he hung in there and good things happened for him."

In his only season as a starter for Iowa in 1986, Vlasic completed 60 percent of his passes for 1,456 yards and 11 touchdowns.

He was selected in the fourth round of the 1987 NFL draft by San Diego. He played three seasons with the Chargers and one with Kansas City, starting four of the 15 games in which he played.

It is well documented Long was a lightly recruited player out of Wheaton, Ill. His only offers were from Iowa, Northwestern and Northern Illinois.

His first visit was to Iowa City.

"The reason I came to Iowa was Hayden and his staff," Long said. "I felt something from the moment I stepped on Iowa soil. I remember getting off the plane, going to Iowa River Power Company, meeting Hayden and his staff and a bunch of other people."

"I'll never forget that night. I called my father and said, 'Dad, this is a great place. I was pretty wide-eyed and all that. I had two other visits after that but neither one was quite the same.'"

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