

## The King and his Court: A look back at Iowa's legendary 1983 coaching staff



By Scott Dochterman Aug 30, 2018



IOWA CITY, Iowa – At the precipice of Iowa's worst winter in the last 80 years, Hayden Fry swept into Iowa City on a zero-degree day with a 10-gallon hat and a 20-gallon sack of dreams.

The day was Dec. 10, 1978, and Fry was hours removed from agreeing to a five-year, \$45,000 contract. Fry vowed to revamp everything associated with Hawkeye football, and he swept up the black-and-gold portion of Iowa with his sweet West Texas drawl.

"We will be colorful, tough and have exciting football," Fry said that afternoon, as reported by the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*.

Changes took place everywhere. Fry sought to pattern Iowa's uniforms after the NFL champion Pittsburgh Steelers, and permission was granted. He worked with a Cedar Rapids graphic artist to create the iconic TigerHawk logo. On the field, Fry blew up the Wing-T offense in favor of a pro-style attack that led the fans into a standing ovation with a new formation.

It all went swimmingly. By Fry's third season, the Hawkeyes were in the Rose Bowl to break the Michigan-Ohio State 13-year headlock on Pasadena. The charismatic Fry built a Camelot in Iowa City of which fans glowingly recall decades later.

Perhaps his greatest legacy was the staff he built. Each member had a characteristic that fashioned Iowa into a Big Ten powerhouse and later served to turn them into Hall of Fame head coaches.

Fry's coaching tree sprouted like a mighty oak between the Mississippi River and Rocky Mountains for more than a generation. In particular, the staff Fry assembled in the early 1980s rivals any other collection of football coaches in the annals of history. Iowa's offensive coordinator was Bill Snyder, who has attained legendary status at Kansas State. The linebackers coach was Barry Alvarez, who led Wisconsin to three Big Ten titles. Starting safety, graduate assistant and later secondary coach Bob Stoops compiled a 190-48 record with 10 Big 12 titles and one national championship at Oklahoma. Defensive line coach Dan McCarney became Iowa State's all-time wins leader. Don Patterson guided Western Illinois to three FCS playoff berths and a national No. 1

ranking.

Offensive line coach Kirk Ferentz replaced Fry at [Iowa](#). Currently, Ferentz stands tied with Fry with 143 wins and has a chance to break the school record Saturday against [Northern Illinois](#).

"You look back on it now and you say, 'Boy, oh boy, this is one of the greatest coaching staffs in NCAA college football history,'" said Phil Haddy, who worked in [Iowa's](#) sports information department from 1971 through 2012. "I think without question, they turned out to be."

"I guess I never thought of it that way until years later," Alvarez said. "But I think everyone in that room respected one another. Each guy took great pride in his job and doing his job well. I think we all had great confidence in one another."

Fry remains a fixture of football lore in [Iowa](#) and especially in the [Iowa](#) City area. The primary thoroughfare in Coralville was renamed Hayden Fry Way. A bronze statue of Fry was commissioned in 2016 and welcomes visitors off Interstate 80. An annual festival called FryFest, which celebrates everything associated with the Hawkeyes, reaches its 10th anniversary Friday.

The theme for FryFest X revolves around Fry's 1983 coaching staff. In addition to the future head coaches, career assistants Bill Brashier, Carl Jackson and Bernie Wyatt were just as integral to the staff.

"It was an amazing staff, and we knew that at the time," Snyder said. "When I say that, we all got along extremely well. All of those guys were really special people, very fine and talented coaches. But they were truly special people."

### The Foundation

Fry had his own television show throughout Texas when he coached the [SMU Mustangs](#) in the 1960s and early 1970s. He was fired, which he later said was for not approving payments to players. Fry next became the head coach and athletic director at North Texas, where he compiled 10-1 and 9-2 records in his final two seasons but couldn't land a bowl bid.



In coming to Iowa, Fry was pleased to just coach rather than serve a dual role. He brought six members from his staff to Iowa City, including Snyder, Brashier and Jackson.

Whether it was shaped early in his career or developed when his penchant for developing assistants into successful head coaches became astounding, Fry developed an axiom when it came to his staff.

"I never hired an assistant coach in my life unless I was completely convinced he was motivated to become a head coach," Fry said on one of his most recent trips to Iowa City. "I knew he'd study the game, be ethical, see that his players graduated. Do all the things that a head coach should do."

Snyder and Brashier provided the foundation of Fry's football machine, and both later made opposite life choices. Snyder guided Iowa's offense through 1988, then left for college football's wasteland at Kansas State, which had compiled only two winning seasons from 1955 through Snyder's arrival. The [Wildcats](#) averaged less than 21,000 fans in Manhattan. Big Eight officials actively tried to nudge Kansas State out of the league, and the school had sold a home game to Oklahoma.

Iowa had its own dubious history that Snyder helped erase. The Hawkeyes limped through 19 consecutive non-winning seasons before 1981 when they tied for the Big Ten title. Snyder worked miracles with Iowa's passing offense in the process. The year before Fry's arrival, the Hawkeyes completed 90 passes all year for 1,083 yards with four touchdowns and 17 interceptions. In 1985, Chuck Long became the first quarterback in FBS history to throw for more than 10,000 career yards.

Snyder's legendary work ethic and attention to detail separated him from his peers, both as an assistant and later as a head coach. In 26 seasons with Kansas State, Snyder carries a 210-110-1 record. In the other 96 years of Kansas State football, the [Wildcats](#) have 299 wins.

"I would say arguably it would be the best coaching job in the history of the game," said Long, who later worked as an assistant at Iowa, Oklahoma and Kansas along with a stint as [San Diego State](#)'s head coach. "I mean, you really had to look at it like that. If you were going to put it on paper and say, 'All right, 1900 until now, what are the top five coaching jobs in history, as far as turning it around and being successful? You'd have to put that in the top five. Maybe No. 1. You get that."

"When I was in coaching, the coaching circles said that. Fellow coaches would say it's amazing what he's done at Kansas State. I remember my dad calling me when he took job. My father said, 'Hey, Chuck, that is the worst program in the country. It's been bad for 80 years. Do you think he can do it?' I said to him, 'Dad, if there's anybody that can do it, it's Bill Snyder.'"

Fry's insistence on assistant coaches aspiring to become head coaches didn't carry over to Brashier, his oldest friend. They were delivered by the same doctor four months apart in Eastland, Texas. Brashier joined Fry's staff at North Texas, then came north with Fry. Although Fry's offensive gimmicks were well-documented, the staple of Iowa's best teams was its bone-crushing defense.

Brashier employed a 5-2 front that stifled opponents. The season before Brashier's arrival, Iowa allowed 186.7 rushing yards per game. In 1981, that number was cut to 86.9.

"I've always said Bill Brashier was the best coach on the staff, regardless of who went on and had some success as head coaches," Snyder said. "Everybody admired and appreciated him, profited by Bill Brashier's presence."

Iowa's defensive assistants learned from Brashier, which benefited them later as head coaches. From the 1983 staff, which included Alvarez, Stoops and McCarney, to later players like Bret Bielema, Mike Stoops, Mark Stoops and Bobby Diaco, everyone employed elements of what Brashier taught them at Iowa.

"You mention a lot of guys that have gone on and had success, and Bill Brashier's every bit as good of a coach, if not better than everyone on that staff," Alvarez said. "He was a really fundamentally sound coach. I took a lot away from him. His defenses were always very sound. He had a nice way about himself. Players loved to play for him."

"Coach Fry was big because he was the head coach, but with Jim Leavitt, Bob Stoops, Mike Stoops, Mark Stoops, my career, the coaches that had come up through Bill Brashier," Bielema said. "We played a defense called an Eagle-20-Sky. We did it 90 percent of the time, but we played it well. We kept it simple and did some things. This was really before computers and I was the GA, and we were playing Michigan. I went into Coach Brashier's office, and I wanted to beat Michigan. It was always my thing. I wanted to beat Michigan ever since I was a little kid."

Bielema produced a mind-numbing scouting report for Brashier on what plays the Wolverines liked to run with three-receiver personnel and how it flipped based on the downs. Brashier seemed confused.

"He looked at me and said, 'Now, you're telling me ...' and I said, 'Yeah, Coach,'" Bielema recalled. "All this mathematics by hand. It was hilarious his reaction. From that point on, I always said, when Coach Brashier wanted something, I had it on his desk by the next day."

Where Fry could get feisty on the field with officials or in news conferences with media, Brashier had the exact opposite personality. In the early 1980s, he was asked to return to North Texas as head coach, but he turned down the opportunity to remain at Iowa.

"Bill Brashier definitely could have been a head coach somewhere, but he chose to be at Iowa and stay with Hayden," Haddy said. "He was a calming influence at the time. You never really saw him get mad, at least not publicly. He always kept his wits about him."

### Defensive replacements

In Fry's first couple of years, he struggled to keep his staff together. He kept previous staff assistants Bernie Wyatt and Dan McCarney but wasn't sure where to put them. Wyatt at first became a recruiting coordinator, but then moved to defensive ends coach when Howard Cissel left. Wyatt was perhaps Iowa's best recruiter, and he consistently mined the New York-New Jersey area for top talent.

McCarney originally was assigned tight ends, but only a few months after arriving at Iowa, defensive line coach Bob Lee returned to Texas for business opportunities. That left an opening in late spring.

Mason City (Iowa) High School coach Barry Alvarez had led his squad to the 1978 Class 4A state title. Alvarez was a linebacker at Nebraska from 1965-67. He was a Cornhuskers graduate assistant when he first met Fry, who was head coach at SMU, at a clinic. Later, when Alvarez coached high school football in Lexington, Neb., he took his staff to North Texas to watch how Fry and Snyder taught the passing game.

Alvarez was interested in the defensive line job, but Fry shifted McCarney to that position group. Fry offered Alvarez the tight end job.

"I wanted to be a head coach at a Division I college," Alvarez said. "Having played at Nebraska, I tried to pattern my career and everything after Bob Devaney. So I was very fortunate. In Mason City, we had some success and joined with Hayden when Hayden came to Iowa and had an opportunity to join his staff.

"It's hard to get your foot in the door. You need a break. You need a lucky break to make that step from high school to college."

After a year coaching Fry's traditional stand-up tight ends, Alvarez moved over to linebackers to replace original coach Tom Cecchini, who left for Minnesota. It was there where Alvarez really started to make a mark.

In 1981, Alvarez coached McI Cole to first-team All-Big Ten honors. Cole was voted the MVP of a team with the Big Ten's best defense that earned a Rose Bowl berth.



Alvarez's greatest Iowa pupil was linebacker Larry Station, whom Alvarez recruited from Omaha, Neb. Station became a four-year starter, a three-time All-Big Ten selection and the only two-time consensus first-team All-America defender in Iowa history. Station's 492 career tackles are the most at Iowa, and he was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 2010.

"Larry was a natural. Larry was very special," Alvarez said. "He was a special athlete. Tremendous balance, combination of strength and agility. He was a Midlands tennis champ. He had the record for deadlift. He was one of the better shot and discus throwers. He had great explosion. He was smart. He was the whole package. So you could see that when you recruited him. He picked things up right away."

The final piece of the 1983 coaching staff was Bob Stoops, who was a graduate assistant in charge of the secondary. Stoops was a three-year starter and the team MVP in 1982. Nobody was tougher or smarter than Stoops as a player, and those who worked with him saw the same traits when he got into coaching.

"You always felt, even as a player, that Bobby would be a very good coach," Alvarez said. "He came from a family of coaches. He's a student of the game. He could relate to people. There was never any doubt in my mind that he could be a great coach."

### Revolving door leads to Ferentz

Along with defensive assistants, Fry lost a few offensive coaches early on. In the summer of 1981, offensive line coach Clovis Hale left for Rice in the Southwest Conference. That left Fry scrounging for a replacement.

About that time, Kirk Ferentz, a 25-year-old former linebacker and baseball player at UConn, had just finished his first season as a graduate assistant at Pittsburgh. Ferentz worked under his high school coach, Joe Moore, who was the offensive line coach at Pitt.

After leaving UConn and staying one season as a graduate assistant, Ferentz had spent two seasons coaching high school football and teaching English at Worcester Academy (Mass.) before heading to Pittsburgh. He arranged a two-year agreement with his wife, Mary, to pursue a college coaching position and then he'd have to pursue full-time work as a high school teacher and coach.

After his first season working under Moore, Ferentz applied for the offensive line position with Appalachian State, but he did not receive a callback.

As Ferentz searched for an opening, Iowa was in scramble mode. Fry delegated to Snyder to make calls about finding an assistant.

"We had a few coaches leave, and Coach Fry was tired of going out and getting new coaches," Snyder said. "I was offensive coordinator and he asked me to do so, so I called a fellow by the name of Joe Moore, who is probably the role model for Kirk. He recommended (Kirk), who I didn't know, but he recommended Kirk at the time, and we brought him in."

Ferentz flew in to Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids, and said, "I thought this would be like 'Green Acres' here." Alvarez was sent to pick up Ferentz and bring him to Iowa City.

"It was interesting because the way Hayden worked it, everybody had some vacation and somebody had to be in the office in case something came up," Alvarez said. "My week in the office happened to be the week we were bringing in offensive line coaches to interview. As I understood it, the one thing they needed was somebody with experience. So Kirk's (25) years old, been a grad assistant at Pitt for a year. I'm thinking, 'It's great they've got this interview, but I don't know if he's the guy that has the experience we're looking for.'"

Then Ferentz showed some of his coaching clips. He knew some of Iowa's personnel because he was scouting film on Illinois, which played Pitt in 1981. Some of Pittsburgh's offensive linemen included the greatest in college football history, including Mark May, Jimbo Covert and Russ Grimm, so the precision was flawless. The blocking style was different from Hale's teaching methods, and Ferentz immediately won over the staff.

"It was an all-NFL Hall of Fame O-line," Alvarez said. "He brought his training tape. You put it in, it's the way it's supposed to be down. That was as good of an O-line as there was any place."

"I think the deal got done on the phone before I got here, I really do," Ferentz said. "Joe could sell, and Joe sold me. I think as long as I didn't throw up on Coach Fry's shoes, I had a chance to get the job. It worked out. The tale of two cities. When I met Coach Fry, I just felt immediately comfortable and you felt like you'd known from for 10 years after five minutes."

Ferentz was one of seven interviews and 300 applicants for the job. He also was the youngest. As expected, there were detractors.

In a June 29, 1981, story in the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, reporter Brian Chapman chided the Ferentz hire. He wrote, "Gazette Sports Editor Mike Chapman recommended one who had been an offensive line coach for several years at a major institution, and had served as an offensive coordinator."



That didn't matter to Ferentz's linemen, who immediately developed a rapport with him. Starting tackle and team captain Bruce Kittle suffered a knee injury, but the offensive line continued to jell and embrace his style of coaching. From 1980 to 1981, Iowa averaged 60 yards more per game running the football with Ferentz teaching an athletic blocking scheme.

"Safe to say, nothing against Clovis, but one of the reasons we won in '81 was because we replaced a line coach with a better line coach," Patterson said. "Kirk was young, but he knew his stuff. He'd been taught by one of the very best. He had great schooling as a young coach. His concepts, his teaching techniques were better than Clovis. Nothing against Clovis, but Clovis had grown up coaching an offensive line that I think had both hands on the ground."

Ferentz molded 12 NFL Draft picks as an Iowa assistant, including three first-rounders. Coupled with his time as head coach, 29 Iowa offensive linemen have become draft selections, including seven first-round picks.

### Commonalities

Each assistant had qualities that served them well as head coaches. All of them learned how to turn around programs because of how they did it at Iowa.

From 1962 until 1980, Iowa failed to post a winning season, which was the nation's longest such drought at the time. From 1981 through 1997, the Hawkeyes competed in 14 bowl games and won three Big Ten titles.

None of Fry's first batch of Iowa assistants took over successful programs. Kansas State's issues were obvious before Snyder revived the Wildcats. Snyder became a five-time national coach of the year and was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 2015.

Alvarez left Iowa after the 1986 season and became Notre Dame's defensive coordinator. In 1990, Alvarez took over at Wisconsin, which was 9-36 over the previous four seasons with paid attendance at 54 percent of capacity.

"In my case, I really thought (Fry's) day-to-day operation and holding coaches and players accountable and how he operated day-to-day was really good," Alvarez said. "Those are some things I used when I went out on my own."

Alvarez led the Badgers for 16 seasons and compiled a 119-74-4 record. He earned three Big Ten titles and won three Rose Bowls. He also was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame.

Stoops, who retired in 2017, was considered the likely successor to Fry at Iowa in late 1998, but he instead chose Oklahoma. The tradition-rich Sooners had endured five consecutive non-winning seasons and a 12-22 mark the previous three years. In his second season, Stoops guided Oklahoma to a national title.

Iowa State was 14-38-3 in its previous five seasons and 0-10-1 before McCarney arrived in 1995. McCarney ranks first in Cyclones history with 56 victories, earned a top-10 ranking midway through the 2002 season and won a school-record nine games in 2000. At Western Illinois, Patterson won two Gateway Conference titles and 63 games, one shy of the school record. He missed 15 games over his final two seasons because of health issues.

Iowa limped to a 3-8 mark in Fry's final season in 1998. Ferentz took over a program that needed a rebuild. Within four years, Ferentz had molded the Hawkeyes into Big Ten champions. Five Ferentz teams have finished in the top 10 and three have competed in major bowl games.

Bielema played and coached for Fry, assisted Ferentz for four seasons, then worked for Snyder at Kansas State and Alvarez at Wisconsin. He replaced Alvarez as head coach with Wisconsin and won three Big Ten titles.

"There's no doubt in my mind, Coach Fry was the ultimate players' coach," Bielema said. "What can we do for the players?"

"Kirk taught me how to listen. If you really pay attention to what he does, he writes down everything. He's never quick to speak. He always listens. Now when he wants to make a point, he'll make it, but he's incredible in that regard.

"Then I went to Bill Snyder, who's a meticulous detailer. He's the classic, leave-no-stone unturned and make sure you turn them over again. His detail was unbelievable. Then I go to Coach Alvarez, and he's everything all combined. Very dominant personality. When he walks into the room, you know he's there. Kind of what those others hadn't, he was kind of that. Coach Alvarez taught me the big picture beyond just coaching football. The administration, alumni — that was the step I needed to get where I needed to be."



Hayden Fry alongside the statue of him that was commissioned in 2016. (Scott Dochterman / The Athletic)

## Legacy

The 1980s remain a golden era for Iowa football of which the shine blazes more brightly with each passing fall. Fry's white pants, sunglasses, offensive exotics, lexicons and candor are familiar throughout the state 20 years since he retired. What never will change is how Fry made people feel, from his players and coaches to the people whose hands he shook in public.

"He was a dying breed," Haddy said. "He did everything. He sold tickets. He coached. He got everybody interested in things. He did it all. Today, the coaches want to coach. Hayden would go to I-Clubs and he'd get there early and he'd stay late and shook every hand. Hayden was a one-of-a-kind. He's the king."

"One thing about Coach Fry, he always talked about this: Don't let a day pass without laughing," Patterson said. "So you've got to find a way to make football fun. It's hard to make it fun because it's a lot of hard work and there's a lot of physicality that goes with it. But he always able to make the players laugh at the end of every practice. We had what we called a cheer, it typically was a joke that one of the players or coaches might tell. Sometimes it was serious. Sometimes it was motivational. Oftentimes it was just a funny story or a joke."

With the main staff intact from 1981 through 1986, Iowa was 52-20-1 with two Big Ten titles and ranked No. 1 for five consecutive weeks in 1985.

Fry, for all of his charisma, couldn't elevate the Hawkeyes by himself. It was Snyder's work ethic, Brashier's discipline, Ferentz's precise teaching methods, Alvarez's coaching and Stoops' instruction that changed Iowa history. None of them was accomplished before joining Fry; all of them became Hall of Fame coaches after working with him.

"We were just a bunch of guys that were coaching football here," Ferentz said. "We enjoyed our roles and we enjoyed being a part of something way bigger than any of us. Coach Fry really set a good structure and program leadership. When I reflected and looked back at it, all of us were Heinz 57 mutts basically. None of us had a very impressive résumé. Zero. That's fair to say. Everybody, top to bottom on the staff. We all just enjoyed coaching."



"It was the most enjoyable professional experience I've ever had. Everybody was very selfless and doing whatever they could to try to move the team forward. To me, good things that happened in the profession or to players recognition-wise are a byproduct."

*(Top photo: University of Iowa Athletics)*



**Scott Dochterman** is a staff writer for The Athletic covering the Iowa Hawkeyes. He previously covered Iowa Athletics for the Cedar Rapids Gazette and Land of 10. Scott also worked as an adjunct professor teaching sports journalism at the University of Iowa.

COMMENTS

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**M Mike U.** · Aug 30, 2018

Awesome article Scott! You're doing a great job covering my favorite team.



**B Brandon O.** · Aug 30, 2018

Besides these guy, the players who went on to become coaches is just as impressive. Hayden was/is a special man.



**R Ross B.** · Aug 30, 2018

Another gem Scott. I have been well aware of this revered staff and the Hayden Fry coaching tree, but this added a great deal of historical context and insight into Coach Farentz and how Iowa football ticks. Really enjoying your work!



**H Hayden U.** · Aug 30, 2018

I'll give you one guess to who my namesake is lol



**L Luke R.** · Aug 30, 2018

Always love reading about the Hayden Fry Era at Iowa. My passion for Iowa football was molded from stories my dad told me about Chuck Long and Larry Station and the rest of those Iowa teams from the 80s. Great piece Scott!



**A Amit S.** · Aug 30, 2018

Coach Fry is one of a kind. What an incredible coaching tree.



**G Greg S.** · Aug 30, 2018

Great article Scott. I have a mixture of goosebumps and tears thinking back to all of those great 80s games and spending a day in Iowa City with my dad.



**Stephen C.** · Aug 31, 2018

Hayden was one of a kind. I remember his first year he had everyone in the Big Ten convinced he was throwing the ball every down. He proclaimed he would fire it out of their own end zone if given the opportunity. I remember Dennis Moseley leading the Big Ten in rushing that year. A bit of classic Fry misdirection!



**Eric K.** · Aug 30, 2018

Damn I can't consume these awesome pieces fast enough



**Robin T.** · Aug 00, 2010

Nice recap Scott. Over four decades, Iowa Football has really had some outstanding moments and people involved.



