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Hayden Fry, coach who made Iowa Hawkeyes winners, dies



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Iowa football coach Hayden Fry is carried off the field by players Parker Wildeman (56) and Matt Purdy (69) after the Hawkeyes defeated Minnesota 21-3 on Nov. 20, 1993. The win was Fry's 200th as a college head coach. (Charlie Neibergal / Associated Press)

Hayden Fry, who changed the image of University of Iowa football from a perennial loser to a consistent winner, died Tuesday. He was 90.

Fry was hired as the Hawkeyes' head football coach in late 1978 and had the job for 20 seasons. Iowa had 17 consecutive nonwinning seasons when he arrived, a streak that grew to 19 after his first two years.

Then, to put a twist on a Fry expression, he stopped selling the sizzle and started peddling the steak. Iowa shared the Big Ten title and went to the Rose Bowl in 1981. The Hawkeyes remained a vital program through most of his tenure.

In all, Iowa shared three Big Ten titles and went to three Rose Bowls under Fry. He was the winningest coach in school history when he retired, with an overall record of 143-89-6, and a Big Ten mark of 96-61-5.

Kirk Ferentz, who followed Fry at Iowa, broke the record in 2018.

'We are proud to know that our father's life had a positive influence on so many people, the players, the coaches, and the fans who played for, worked with, and supported his long and successful coaching career,' Fry's family said in a statement late Tuesday. 'His legend will live forever with the people he touched and inspired, and the programs he led to greater heights.'

Fry coached Iowa in 14 bowl games. His 1985 team was ranked No. 1 in the nation for five consecutive weeks.

Fry retired as Iowa's coach shortly after the 1998 season concluded. He was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 2003 and the Rose Bowl Hall of Fame in 2010.

John Hayden Fry was born Feb. 28, 1929, in Eastland, Texas. He grew up in the west Texas city of Odessa, where he quarterbacked the high school team there to a Texas state championship. He got a football scholarship at Baylor University and earned a degree in psychology.

After serving in the U.S. Marine Corps from 1952 to 1955, he was discharged with the rank of captain. He returned to Odessa to teach and coach football, and was named the head coach at Odessa High School in 1956. He advanced to college coaching three years later, serving as an assistant coach at Baylor for two years and at Arkansas for one.

He started an 11-year run as the head coach at Southern Methodist University in 1962. Battling the deeper pockets of programs like Texas, Arkansas and Texas A&M, Fry's record was 49-66-1. But in 1966 the Mustangs won their first Southwest Conference championship in 18 years.

Fry frequently said his top achievement in coaching was being the first coach to recruit a black player into the Southwest Conference. That was Jerry Levias, who went on to be a three-time all-conference player and an All-America defensive back.

In 2008, Fry and Levias were featured in the HBO documentary 'Breaking the Huddle: The Integration of College Football.'

Though SMU went 7-4 in 1971, Fry was fired after the season. In a post-retirement book he wrote with former Iowa sports information director George Wine, 'Hayden Fry: A High Porch Picnic,' he said:

'For several years some of SMU's big contributors had been trying to get me to buy players. They wanted me to use their money to recruit illegally, and I wouldn't do it. Every time I was approached on the matter I told them absolutely no. I believe they used a new president who wasn't strong enough to stand up to them to get to me.'

Several weeks later, Fry was hired as football coach and athletics director at North Texas State University. The team went 40-23-3 in Fry's six seasons there. His final NTSU team went 9-2 in 1978, but received no bowl invitation. That only heightened Fry's interest when then-Iowa athletics director Bump Elliott inquired if he would be interested in interviewing for the vacant Hawkeyes job.

Fry had never been to Iowa before taking the position, but became an icon in the state within a few years. He was a stranger in a strange land with his Texan accent and vast repertoire of phrases that needed deciphering to Iowans.

But he quickly became dear to Iowa fans' hearts with an innovative and aggressive offense that was radical at the time for the Big Ten.

He assembled a coaching staff that was notable for the roles they played at Iowa and for going on to have their own head-coaching success stories elsewhere. They included Bill Snyder, Barry Alvarez, Dan McCarney, Bob Stoops and Ferentz. Fry hired Ferentz to be his offensive line coach in 1981 when Ferentz was a 25-year-old graduate assistant coach at the University of Pittsburgh.



In Fry's third year, Iowa scored a shocking 9-7 win at Michigan, and closed the regular-season with a 36-7 Kinnick Stadium thumping of Michigan State that gave the Hawkeyes a tie for the Big Ten title and the league's berth in the Rose Bowl.

Roses made their way into the stadium before game's end, and fans threw them onto the field in salute. It was the first of eight straight winning seasons.

The Big Ten's 'Big Two and Little Eight,' with Michigan and Ohio State the perennial big two, was dented.

'I liked it when Iowa was good. It really added something to the conference,' said legendary Michigan coach Bo Schembechler, who was on the losing side of perhaps the most-memorable game in Kinnick Stadium history. [No. 1 Iowa's 12-10 win over the No. 2 Wolverines in 1985.](#)

The two coaches were fierce competitors, but became close friends as time passed. Schembechler appeared at a salute to Fry in Carver-Hawkeye Arena in March 1999.

Off the field, Fry started a marketing group to create a logo for the football program. He had already given the Hawkeyes a distinctive look by getting permission from the NFL's Pittsburgh Steelers to imitate their black-and-gold uniform.

Early in his time at Iowa, Fry wanted a logo for the program. With the help of Wine and Cedar Rapids printer Chuck Edwards, Bill Colbert of Cedar Rapids was asked to come up with some sketches.

[The tigerhawk logo was born in 1979.](#) It became the logo identified with all things Hawkeye, and has remained so.

'A real splash of sunshine!' Fry told Colbert and Edwards.

'We changed our image,' he said later.

Fry eventually turned the marketing business over to the university.

The second half of Fry's time at Iowa wasn't quite as successful as the first half on the field, but the Hawkeyes did return to the Rose Bowl in 1990, won 10 games in 1991, and went to bowls in each of the three seasons before his final one, 1998. The Hawkeyes were a mere 3-8 that season, and Fry retired shortly afterward. He had kept it secret, but he coached that season while undergoing radiation treatments for prostate cancer.

Fry had several bouts with cancer in his retirement years, and spent some of his post-football years raising money for cancer research. He chaired a fundraising campaign for the J. Hayden Fry Center for Prostate Cancer Research at the UI Hospitals and Clinics.

[Fry moved to Mesquite, Nev.,](#) shortly after he left coaching, but returned to Iowa often for much of his post-football life. In 2009, an annual one-day FRYfest debuted in Coralville. The inaugural event featured Coralville's First Avenue being co-named Hayden Fry Way. [A bronze statue of Fry](#) is outside the Iowa City/Coralville Convention & Visitors Bureau on Hayden Fry Way.

Last April, [dozens of Fry's former players gathered in Dallas](#) to greet him and be greeted by him in a celebration of his 90th birthday.

Details of a memorial service will be announced later, Fry's family said Tuesday.

[UNIVERSITY OF IOWA](#) HAYDEN FRY, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

