

'He's the king': Remembering the unmistakable charisma and enduring legacy of Hayden Fry



By Scott Dochterman Dec 18, 2019

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IOWA CITY, Iowa — An icon. An innovator. A motivator. A legend.

College Football Hall of Fame coach Hayden Fry was all of these. Now, after losing a final battle with cancer at age 90, he belongs to the ages.

No single person wielded more influence at the University of Iowa or was more important to its history than Fry. From inventing the logo that still represents the Hawkeyes to breaking the Michigan-Ohio State 13-year Rose Bowl stranglehold to building one of the sport's greatest coaching trees to shattering the Southwest Conference racial barrier at SMU, Fry's influence on college football ranks among the most impactful in the sport's history.

"Hayden Fry is a college football icon and an Iowa legend," Iowa coach Kirk Ferentz said in a statement. "His Hall of Fame career is well known, but personally, he will always be the man who took a chance on me at the start of my coaching career. I was proud to coach with him and honored to succeed him when he retired. He's been a great mentor and a true friend. I am forever grateful to him."

Fry was born in Eastland, Texas, and grew up in Odessa. His homespun, colloquial clichés were formed in his days as a West Texas youth. His common phrase "scratch where it itches" became his trademark Haydenism. Few, if any, coaches had a better psychological read on a team or a situation. Fry was folksy and funny but could be tough and stern. His military background as a captain in the Marines demanded discipline. He finished his 37-year coaching career with a 232-178-10 coaching record. He was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 2003.

With unmistakable charisma, Fry developed friendships as a youngster with Roy Orbison and President George H.W. Bush and later with John Wayne and Lee Iacocca, the Ford Motor Co. and Chrysler Corp. CEO. Fry once said that Iacocca was so impressed with SMU's hard-fought loss to Michigan that he named Ford's muscle vehicle "the Mustang."

Fry became Iowa's coach in 1979 and ended a 19-year streak of non-winning seasons with a Rose Bowl appearance in 1981. It was the first time since 1967 that a team other than Michigan or Ohio State represented the league in Pasadena. Fry won Big Ten titles in 1981, 1985 and 1990 and guided the Hawkeyes to 14 bowl games over a 17-year period. His 96 wins in Big Ten play sit fifth in league annals.

Fry's coaching tree ranks among the elite in college football history. His 1983 staff included Bill Snyder, Barry Alvarez, Kirk Ferentz, Dan McCarney and Bob Stoops, all of whom became the winningest head coaches at their respective schools. Others like Bret Bielema, Mike Stoops, Mark Stoops, Bo Pelini, Jim Leavitt, Jay Norvell and Bob Diaco started their coaching careers under Fry.

But of all his many accomplishments, Fry was most proud of giving Jerry LeVias a scholarship at SMU to integrate the Southwest Conference in 1965.

"That is the greatest thing I did in 47 years of coaching, from high school to the Marine Corps to college, is to give the first black player a scholarship in that part of the world because it opened up the door for all the other fine black players to at least have a choice of where they wanted to go to school," Fry said. "Because at that time they had to go to the Big Ten or the Pac-10 or whatever.

"That was a very difficult thing to do. I've been told repeatedly by law enforcement, specifically by the FBI and CIA and other people I had to deal with, not to discuss it publicly because what it does is it triggers all the other people in the world that are sick or as I call the rednecks who are still fighting the Civil War and they do bad things. So you don't discuss some of those things. But I can just tell you briefly I would say 95 percent of you present would not believe what Jerry LeVias went through, what I went through, what my coaching staff went through from examining our locker room on out-of-town trips, to checking the airplane that we flew on to see if there was a bomb on it, whatever. We even had a sniper in the stands at one of the games that was going to kill Jerry.



"We screened all of his mail, all of his telephone calls. But he had real problems on campus, from his own teammates, some of the faculty members. They just weren't used to dealing with African-Americans and it was bad and to this day it was bad. A lot of it is not publicized. And I would never tell Jerry all of the things that were bad because it would have scared him to death. He was scared enough as it was."

In a statement Tuesday night, LeVias said, "Coach Fry caught a lot of hell for doing what he did."

Fry led SMU for 11 seasons. In 1966, he took the Mustangs to the Southwest Conference title and a Cotton Bowl berth. In his final season, SMU finished 7-4 but Fry was fired after a 49-66-1 overall record.

"I remember as a kid watching the Hayden Fry Show in Texas at SMU," said longtime Iowa assistant Don Patterson, who was Fry's offensive coordinator from 1989-98. "Anybody who knows anything about Texas football understands he's a living legend in Texas. To this day he is. He can't go anywhere in Texas without being noticed."

After leaving SMU, Fry spent six years at North Texas and posted 10-1 and 9-2 records in his final two years, respectively. His Mean Green squad, however, was not invited to a bowl game either year and it frustrated him. In late 1978, he met with Iowa athletics director Bump Elliott to discuss the vacant Hawkeyes job. That meeting changed the course of Iowa and the Big Ten forever.

Picking Iowa

The Hawkeyes had become a college football wasteland. Iowa hadn't posted a winning season since 1961, and from 1970-78, the Hawkeyes were 25-71-2. Yet with a strong fan base continuing to fill Kinnick Stadium, Elliott tapped the confident, loquacious Texan to reverse the generational decline.

Fry held a news conference on Dec. 10, 1978, and vowed to change the culture.

"We will be colorful, tough, and we will have exciting football," Fry said that day, as reported by the Cedar Rapids Gazette. "I've always been a passing coach. We throw the football to open up the defense so we can do what we want to do — run the football.

"We may run the Statue of Liberty play out of the end zone; that's my style of football. We are exciting, but we do this in order to win."

In the Hawkeyes' home opener, the Hawkeyes faithful gave Fry and his team a standing ovation as they shifted into multiple formations. Iowa blew a 26-3 lead in a 30-26 loss to Indiana, which was coached by Lee Corso. The following week, Iowa traveled to Oklahoma and competed against the mighty Sooners and Heisman Trophy-winning running back Billy Sims, but still lost 21-6.

In what initially seemed like a moral victory, Fry, a psychology major at Baylor, saw it differently.

"I just told my football team that's what's wrong with our ball club," Fry said, as reported by the Cedar Rapids Gazette. "We get our asses kicked and we get complimented. If I see one guy with a smile on his face, I'm gonna bust him right in the mouth."

Iowa finished 5-6 in his first year and 4-7 in 1980. Still, the vibe had changed around the program entering his third season.

"I think people sensed that Hayden was different, that the program he brought was different than what they had seen before," said Alvarez, then the Iowa linebackers coach. "We were very competitive."

Fry wanted to change the image of Iowa football as much as the on-field product. He gained permission from the Pittsburgh Steelers to pattern the Hawkeyes' black-and-gold uniforms in a similar fashion. He opted for a different logo on the helmet, so he solicited ideas from fans and partnered with an advertising firm. After a weekend of sketches, Bill Colbert of Three Arts Advertising in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, designed the TigerHawk.

"From where I come from, it's called selling the sizzle before the steak," Fry said.

The players were instructed to enter and leave the playing field in a "Swarm" formation, which signifies both the team aspect and also was designed to prevent energy burnout.

Fry also had the Kinnick Stadium visiting locker room walls painted pink because he considered it a passive color. For 40 years, different teams have papered every inch of the locker room to try to alter its effects on their players. When Iowa faced a tough opponent, Fry was loose with his players and quarreled with media over trivial matters to deflect attention. When the Hawkeyes played an inferior opponent, Fry drilled his players like a taskmaster.

"He was a wonderful head coach," said Phil Haddy, a member of Iowa's sports information department from 1971-2011. "He was a wonderful administrator. At the same time, a huckster. He could sell tickets. He was good. Whenever he went to a press conference, I'd go up and visit with him first. He'd always be sour. 'It's not in my contract. I don't have to do these things.' When he'd walk into the room, every week, 'How y'all doing?' He'd be smiling. He'd be 110 percent professional.

"He was a dying breed. 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."

During the farming crisis in 1985, Fry had a sticker with the initials "ANF — America Needs Farmers" placed on Iowa's helmets. He also sang and danced "The Hokey Pokey" in the locker room after victories and wore white pants and sunglasses on the sidelines.



"I'm not sure there's another person alive who could come in and accomplish what he did in terms of turning things around, changing attitudes," Ferentz said in a previous interview. "The impact he had, not just on the program, but the entire state was just unbelievable."

Magical year

In 1981, Fry finally had a team that could match his marketing. With a defense that still sits among the best in school history, the Hawkeyes stopped No. 6 Nebraska 10-7 in the opener. Two weeks later, Iowa beat No. 6 UCLA 20-7.

"Gee whiz, how about that!" Fry said afterward. "We got two of the top 10. How sweet it is!"

With a 9-7 upset over defending Big Ten champion and No. 5-ranked Michigan and a 33-7 win against Purdue to stop a 20-game losing streak to the Boilermakers, Fry finally pushed Iowa to its elusive winning season.

"Waaa-hooo," Fry yelled when he met with reporters. "Twenty cotton-picking years, and we finally did it. We had a great opportunity to fold our tent for the season after last week (a loss to Illinois) and we didn't do it."

Entering the regular-season finale, Iowa needed Ohio State to beat Michigan and then topple Michigan State to reach the Rose Bowl. By the third quarter, word of Ohio State's victory reached Kinnick Stadium. The Hawkeyes crushed

the Spartans 36-7 to claim a share of its first Big Ten title since 1958 and earn a trip to Pasadena.

"It was a group of young men that were very hungry, been kicked around, had a hard time," Fry said on one of his final trips to Iowa City. "To see them win the Big Ten championship was one of the highlights of my career.

"They hadn't had a winning season in 19 seasons and psychologically, I had a great advantage because they were easy to motivate. They were told they couldn't win, and they were determined to show people that they could."

Starting safety Bob Stoops, who later became a national championship-winning head coach at Oklahoma, said Fry's motivation was what propelled the Hawkeyes to the Rose Bowl.

"He had swagger. He projected confidence," Stoops said during an Iowa City appearance. "That's what we needed at the time at Iowa. We're like, 'You know what, we can beat anyone.' Hayden gave us that swagger and that attitude, and I've always remembered it."

The Hawkeyes became a formidable Big Ten program for the rest of the decade. In 1985, Iowa was ranked No. 1 nationally for five consecutive weeks. In the first No. 1 vs. No. 2 game in Big Ten history, the Hawkeyes beat Michigan on a game-winning field goal on the game's final play. The Hawkeyes won the Big Ten title outright and earned another trip to Pasadena. His quarterback, Chuck Long, was a two-time consensus All-American quarterback and finished second in Heisman Trophy voting that year.

"Hayden was disciplined, but he made it fun," Long said. "There's times you don't want to even go to practice because it's drudgery and it's mundane. It was never mundane under Hayden Fry. Every day you're like, 'What he's going to say next?' You couldn't wait to get to practice because it was so much fun. Now we worked hard. We worked extremely hard, but we always had fun. I think that's a special trait.

"We ended with what we called a cheer. It was on the script. Cheer. C-h-e-e-r. So he gathered up the team, whether it was a good practice or a bad practice and said cheer. Led us with a story or a joke. Something funny and end on a good note every day. Regardless of how the practice went."

In 1990, Fry took the Hawkeyes to the Rose Bowl for the final time. A year later, Iowa finished 10-1-1, the school's best single-season record under the coach. Twice, Fry's teams finished in the top 10 and placed in the top 25 eight other times. From 1981-91, only Michigan won more league and bowl games among Big Ten teams than Iowa.



Fry's 143 wins were the most in school history until Ferentz passed him in 2018 and rank sixth all time among Big Ten coaches. Fry's 96 league victories are fifth, one shy of Ferentz.

“Coach Fry probably doesn’t get enough credit for just the impact he had on this entire conference, let alone our program,” Ferentz said.

Legacy

Fry’s coaching tree is what defines him outside of Iowa. His first offensive coordinator was Snyder, the architect of the sport’s greatest turnaround at Kansas State. Alvarez, who achieved similar success at Wisconsin, coached the linebackers until 1986. Both are in the College Football Hall of Fame.

Joining them in the hall of fame one day will be Stoops, who was 190-48 in 18 seasons at Oklahoma with 10 Big 12 titles and a national championship in 2000. Ferentz coached Iowa’s offensive line and has 161 wins at Iowa. Defensive line coach Dan McCarney has the most victories in Iowa State history.

“Coach Fry would say, ‘If I had one particular skill, it was probably my ability to judge who to hire,’” said Patterson, who is one victory shy of becoming Western Illinois’ all-time wins leader. “He always famously said, ‘I won’t hire coaches who don’t have an interest in being head coaches.’ That wasn’t always true. (Defensive coordinator) Bill Brashier had opportunities to be a head coach and passed them up to stay at Iowa. I think it generally was true.”

In 2018, Mark Stoops guided Kentucky to a 10-win season for only the third time in school history. Bielema took Wisconsin to three consecutive Big Ten titles from 2010 through 2012.

“The day he retired, he came into my office and he sat and he said some really cool things,” Bielema said. “He wrote me a letter that I carry in my planner to this day and said ‘You’re a good coach, you’re going to be a head coach someday, make sure you’re prepared when you get there.’ I was crying my eyes out because the biggest mentor in my life was retiring.”

Fry’s legacy within Iowa encompasses all of his accomplishments. The football complex around Kinnick Stadium is named for Fry. In Coralville, First Avenue was renamed Hayden Fry Way. In 2009, FryFest debuted, which celebrates everything associated with Iowa athletics. In 2016, Fry’s bronze likeness was unveiled with a 6-foot statue. Fry, then 87, made his final public appearance and smiled, waved and spoke before a crowd of about 800. In typical Fry fashion, Fry offered up a quip before the statue was unveiled.



“The main thing is, be sure you put me high enough on the foundation that the dogs can’t urinate on my shoes,” Fry said to laughs.

There never will be another Hayden Fry. Not in Iowa. Not in college football.
Not anywhere.

(Top photo: Sporting News via Getty Images)



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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 **Jeffrey N.** · Dec 18, 2019
Outstanding article about a great man.

 1  1 ...

Scott Dochterman · Dec 18, 2019 · STAFF

@Jeffrey N. Thanks so much, Jeffrey. I really appreciate it.



John M. · Dec 18, 2019

Great article. As a CFB fan in Georgia I obviously knew the name and respect he garnered but this showed me how he got his start. Condolences to Iowa fans and his friends and family.



Erik H. · Dec 18, 2019

Outstanding tribute. I had never even heard about Iowa — always confused it with Idaho — until that first Hawkeye Rose Bowl. Hayden Fry literally put Iowa on the map for me.



Scott Dochterman · Dec 18, 2019 · STAFF

@Erik H. Thanks so much.



Jake V. · Dec 18, 2019

Great tribute Scott, thank you! He could walk on water, but I think he rather walk through a corn or bean field instead. Glad he's cancer free now. Writing this with a tear. Go Hawks 🙌



Scott Dochterman · Dec 18, 2019 · STAFF

@Jake V. I remember him tearing up saying "I'll Always Be A Hawk" at his retirement press conference in 1998. It was emotional. He brought a sense of pride and joy that never will be matched.



Gerald P. · Dec 18, 2019

Was a young man gaining sports consciousness when Hayden Fry was at SMU and then North Texas. Both schools were in my neck of the woods and I got to see and read a lot about Coach Fry. He was a hell of a man and his principles were unwavering. The work he did at Iowa is legendary and perhaps his greatest accomplishment is the coaching tree he fathered. Rest in Peace to a GREAT man.



Richard S. · Dec 18, 2019

Friday, November 20, 1981: Rolling Stones concert; UNI-Dome, Cedar Falls, IA
Saturday, November 21, 1981: Iowa-Michigan State; Kinnick Stadium, Iowa City, IA
I traded two extra Stones tickets for two Iowa football tickets. 50-yard line, 10th row.
Pre-concert party; concert; post-concert party; 2 hours of sleep; drive to Iowa City for my first game at Kinnick Stadium; crazy atmosphere; vendors selling roses; Ohio State beats Michigan; crowd goes nuts; Hawkeye win puts them in Rose Bowl; Hawks lead 16-7 at half; dominate second half, win 36-7; tens of thousands rush the field; thought I would be crushed; party all night in Iowa City; get back to Cedar Falls at 10:00am Sunday. Concert was fine; my first game at Kinnick puts them in the Rose Bowl, PRICELESS! Thanks Hayden!



Rob F. · Dec 18, 2019

@Richard S. That sounds like the best 48 hours anyone could possibly have. So awesome.



Richard S. · Dec 18, 2019

@Rob F. It was. After that, in Iowa, Hayden was bigger than Mick and the Stones. What Hayden did back then no one in their right mind would do. Take over a program after 17 straight losing seasons! Someone would have to have some big stones to do that.



[Hidden] · Dec 18, 2019

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Scott Dochterman · Dec 18, 2019 · STAFF
@Scott S. Thanks so much, Scott. I have a nephew named Hayden. He truly was an icon. He would be George Washington's face on a UI Mount Rushmore.

👍 1 ↻

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👍 6 ↻ ...

Amit S. · Dec 18, 2019
My heart is so heavy today... thank you for putting it into words, what Coach Fry was all about... RIP Coach!

👍 5 ↻ 1 ...

Scott Dochterman · Dec 18, 2019 · STAFF
@Amit S. His impact was immeasurable. Everyone who knew him or saw what he did feels the same way today. It's like losing a grandparent.

👍 2 ↻

Jacob W. · Dec 18, 2019
You hit this one out of the park Scott!!!!

👍 5 ↻ 1 ...

Scott Dochterman · Dec 18, 2019 · STAFF
@Jacob W. Thanks Jacob!

👍 ↻

James G. · Dec 18, 2019
I grew up in Dallas in the 60's and well remember the issues with LeVias. Jerry was also one player credited with the first endzone celebrations.

👍 5 ↻ 3 ...

Scott Dochterman · Dec 18, 2019 · STAFF
@James G. I did not know about that about Jerry. I was rooting for an Iowa-SMU game in the Cotton Bowl this year with Hayden being able to attend. Both teams were about one game away from making it happen, but it would have been a neat moment.

👍 1 ↻

James G. · Dec 18, 2019
@Scott Dochterman I'd better correct my dumb mistake. I was thinking of Elmo Wright (1965 Houston Cougars) for the early end zone spike and dance. The bowl match-up would have been great.

👍 2 ↻ ...

Jeffrey K. · Dec 18, 2019
Great article. If my memory serves me correctly, Hayden Fox from TV show Coach was named for Hayden Frye

👍 ↻ ...

Meredith H. · Dec 18, 2019
A great tribute to an amazing coach!

👍 4 ↻ ...

Zach A. · Dec 18, 2019
Wonderful tribute. I had no idea he had such an enormous impact in the SWC and Texas.

👍 4 ↻ ...

Jerad H. · Dec 18, 2019
Amazing week of article Scott. Between this article and the Deuce Hogan profile my subscription has been worth it.



Christopher W. · Dec 18, 2019

I know it only merited a paragraph in your story, but Fry meant a huge deal to North Texas as well. That 10-1 season is still the only instance of double-digit wins in our history. He always had a keen eye for marketing as well, and commissioned the eagle logo (google: "Flying worm") whose derivative is still used today as our primary athletics mark.

He also appreciated that the battles and tribulations he fought at SMU over bringing on Jerry Levis were already in-hand in Denton, as UNT was the first school in Texas to integrate on the football field with Abner Haynes and Leon King in 1956. Ultimately, you're correct that his frustrations over no bowl invites with those stellar records warranted his seeking elsewhere, ultimately in Iowa City. He had a particular foresight that UNT's political sphere of influence was going to significantly hamper its athletic ambitions – something that is only now in the last ten years being course corrected.



Gwen M. · Dec 18, 2019

He was the king, no doubt!



Tim F. · Dec 18, 2019

A true legend. Great job Scott.



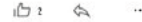
Scott Dochterman · Dec 18, 2019 **STAFF**

@Tim F. Thanks!



Steve B. · Dec 18, 2019

Bump Elliott knowing he had one chance to hire a head coach and picking Hayden Fry. Hayden taking the dumpster fire of Iowa football and changing the culture so that they returned to being a winning program-- nothing short of amazing to me. Who knows where Iowa football is today if another person is hired. Thank you for the great article Scott, a well written tribute to an Iowa legend.



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