

## Hayden Fry and the lasting impact of college football's most prolific coaching tree



By Scott Dochterman Dec 19, 2019

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IOWA CITY, Iowa — There was no template for Hayden Fry to follow when he built his football staff in early 1979.

The coach planned to take as many of his North Texas State assistants northbound as possible. That included offensive coordinator Bill Snyder, defensive coordinator Bill Brashier, running backs coach Carl Jackson plus others like Howard Cissel, Bob Lee and Clovis Hale. Fry also interviewed Bob Commings' former staffers and kept Bernie Wyatt as a recruiting coordinator.

When it was graduate assistant Dan McCarney's turn, the 25-year-old son of the Iowa City police chief and a former Iowa player expected a short conversation.

"I just thought it was a 'How you doing? Good to see you, don't let the door hit you in the rear end out of here,'" McCarney said. "About 20 minutes into it, coach Fry just said, Dan, what do you think about being my tight ends coach? I about jumped off the couch I was on. We were in Bump Elliott's office. That's where coach Fry was doing the interviews, and I was shocked to get the opportunity."

A few months later, Cissel and Lee had left. Wyatt shifted to defensive ends coach but remained as Iowa's most prolific East Coast recruiter. McCarney switched to defensive line, which reopened the tight ends spot. Fry had his eye on Mason City (Iowa) High School coach Barry Alvarez, who took his squad to the 1978 Class 4A state title.

Alvarez played linebacker at Nebraska and worked as a graduate assistant under Bob Devaney when he first met Fry at a clinic. When Alvarez coached high school football in Lexington, Neb., he took his staff to North Texas State to observe Fry and Snyder teaching the passing game.

"In Mason City, we had some success," Alvarez said. "When Hayden came to Iowa, I 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."

Two years later, Alvarez picked up 25-year-old Pittsburgh graduate assistant Kirk Ferentz at the airport and drove him to Iowa City to interview for the vacant offensive line job. Ferentz previously had applied for a job at [Appalachian State](#) and didn't even receive a call. Fry then hired Ferentz.

All three received their first full-time college opportunity under Fry. All three became the winningest coaches in three different programs' histories.

"Kirk Ferentz and I hadn't earned or probably didn't deserve to be Big Ten offensive and defensive line coaches based on experience," McCarney said. "But (Fry) saw things in us we didn't see in ourselves and gave us incredible opportunities.

"You never wanted to let him down. You never wanted to disappoint him. You always wanted to make him proud. And from the first day he offered me a job until the day he died, I always wanted him to be proud of me as a coach and a recruiter and a person."

Fry, 90, died Tuesday after a 21-year battle with cancer. His [hall-of-fame coaching legacy](#) included integration, marketing prowess, inspiration for the television show "Coach," the [Iowa](#) football resurrection and punching through the Big Ten's power structure. His longest-lasting impact on college football itself is his coaching tree. Alvarez won three Rose Bowls at Wisconsin and joined Fry as a member of the College Football Hall of Fame. Ferentz succeeded Fry at [Iowa](#) in 1999 and has 161 career victories and five top-10 finishes. McCarney guided [Iowa State](#)'s program for 12 seasons and his 56 wins are the most in Cyclones' history. He also directed ISU to its only nine-win campaign in 2000.

Snyder, the meticulous offensive architect, left [Iowa](#) for [Kansas State](#) in 1989 and perhaps surpassed his [Iowa](#) contemporaries in accomplishment. Before retiring last season, Snyder compiled a 215-117-1 record in 27 seasons. In the other 97 years of Kansas State football, the Wildcats have 307 wins. Snyder, like Alvarez and Fry, is a member of the College Football Hall of Fame.



Bill Snyder was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 2015. (Getty Images)

In 1978, one season before Fry arrived, the [Hawkeyes](#) completed only 90 passes for 1,083 yards, four touchdowns and 17 interceptions. In 1985, Chuck Long became the first quarterback in NCAA history to throw for more than 10,000 career passing yards and was the Heisman Trophy runner-up. Fry opened up the offense and Snyder fashioned the passing game into a winner.

"We're all different. We all came from different backgrounds, at least the staff that I joined in '81," Ferentz said. "I thought a lot about the nine years I was gone, why that happened? What made that whole period so possible? You look at the résumé of every guy on that staff, the '81 staff, none of us had résumés, really. I mean, we were low-pedigree guys. And for some reason, he took a

chance on each and every one of us. He selected us all.”

“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 final 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.”

In 1981, Iowa earned its first winning season in 19 years, claimed a share of the Big Ten title and picked up a trip to the Rose Bowl. Bob Stoops was one of Iowa’s safeties that year. In 1982, Stoops was named a team captain and first-team All-Big Ten.

“I think as much as anything, what I’ll always remember about him is the toughness and the swagger he brought to a program that had none,” Stoops said. “The white pants. The sunglasses in the interviews. And more than that, just talking to us and building us up when we had no confidence or swagger. He brought it. He exuded it so much that we followed it. It started to take effect to all of us early on.

“We went through 17, 18, 19 years of losing seasons, to his third year, we’re in the Rose Bowl. I mean, that’s as remarkable a turnaround as there’s ever been.”

Stoops became an Iowa graduate assistant in 1983, later joined Snyder’s staff and eventually became the Oklahoma head coach in 1999. He retired before the 2017 season with 190-48 record, one national title and 10 Big 12 championships. Stoops is a lock for the College Football Hall of Fame.



Kirk Ferentz and Bob Stoops in 2011. (Christian Petersen / Getty Images)

Iowa’s 1983 staff remains the gold standard of coaching units. Brashier, Wyatt and Jackson were career assistants but considered indispensable. Wyatt and Jackson were tremendous recruiters in New Jersey and Texas, respectively. Brashier’s technically sound 5-2 defense stifled opponents. In 1978, one year before Brashier’s arrival, Iowa allowed 186.7 rushing yards per game. In 1981, that number fell 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.”

Tight ends coach Don Patterson, who later replaced Snyder as offensive coordinator, won 63 games at Western Illinois, just one shy of the school record. Except for four seasons in the mid-1990s, wide receivers coach Del Miller was a career assistant and was Snyder’s first hire at Kansas State. Counting Fry, eight different coaches on Iowa’s 1983 staff combined to win 1,061 games leading programs.

With that many elite-level coaches, it takes a skilled manager to juggle opinions and egos. That was Fry.

"There was never any doubt who was in charge, and there was never any doubt who the head coach was," McCarney said. "There was no secret to that, and there were no power struggles to see who might have some power in that program and on that coaching staff. There was one head coach and that was Hayden Fry."

"There was great unity in that room any time we were going there together," Ferentz said. "And he was at the head of the table. There was no question about who was in charge and who was setting the bar and setting expectations."

Fry was secure enough in his abilities to encourage feedback from his staff. While the staff fell in line behind the coach, healthy disagreements were encouraged.

"There's got to be loyalty," McCarney said. "It was really competitive within our football staff and our football team. Coach Fry never wanted, I call them head bobbbers, where they just bob their heads. He said there's nothing wrong with knocking a scab off now and then and having disagreements. But when we walked out of there, we were all on the same page. If you weren't, if I wasn't, whoever it was, we're gonna get that right or don't let the door hit you on the ass on the way out of here."

From 1981-1991, Iowa had more Big Ten and overall victories than every league competitor but Michigan. The Hawkeyes went to 10 bowls — including three trips to Pasadena — over that 11-year period and were 4-5-1.

The staff changed dramatically by the end of the decade. Alvarez was the first to leave, first for Notre Dame, then Wisconsin. McCarney and Wyatt later joined Alvarez in Madison. Stoops became a full-time assistant at Kent State before landing at K-State with Snyder and Miller. Ferentz left in 1990 to become head coach at Maine. Their departures led to other assistants receiving opportunities. Mark Stoops (Kentucky), Mike Stoops (Arizona) Bret Bielema (Wisconsin, Arkansas), Jay Norvell (Nevada), Long (San Diego State) and Bob Diaco (Connecticut) played for Fry. Bo Pelini and Jim Leavitt were graduate assistants who became head coaches, as did assistant John Austin.

For all the staffers, leaving was difficult, especially for McCarney. With Alvarez at Wisconsin, they built a model designed to beat Iowa. In 1994, McCarney then took over at Iowa State and tried to turn an instate competition into a rivalry. By 1998 in Fry's final season, the Cyclones upset the Hawkeyes, 27-9, to end Iowa's 15-year winning streak.

"I remember like it was yesterday," McCarney said. "We shook hands. He gave me a hug and he said, 'Your kids played their butts off, Mac. You've got a hell of a team and I love you.' And that was him."

Stoops, McCarney, and about 60 former assistants and players joined Fry in Dallas this spring to celebrate the coach's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. They swapped tales tall and small — "There's a story for every occasion, and most of them are true," McCarney said. While Fry's body was failing, his mind remained sharp and his recall of names and events was spot on.



"I think Dan McCarney said it the best," Stoops said. "He texted me a while ago, right when it happened, when he heard Coach passed. He goes, 'Look at our lives. Dan McCarney. Barry Alvarez. Bill Snyder. Bill Brashier. All of us. So many people. My brothers. I'm missing so many people. If he doesn't come to Iowa, all our lives are changed. He impacted so many people in such a positive way. And that's just us coaches, let alone all the players. I speak for so many that he just made such a positive impact on so many lives, and in such a big way. He just had that swagger way back when. He exuded it to all of us."

For all of those who knew him, some of whom were closer than others, but none had to deal with Fry's shadow like Ferentz. Their personalities could not be more different, from Fry's larger-than-life persona to Ferentz's understated dry humor. They handled the Iowa program in different fashions but their results were similar. Their mutual respect was evident every time the two mentioned one another in casual conversation or in an interview.

Ferentz delayed a flight to San Diego on Wednesday to speak publicly about his former boss. He broke down multiple times when discussing Fry's impact on him. Iowa will honor Fry in some way next week at the Holiday Bowl.

"We all have mentors," Ferentz said. "It starts at home usually with your parents and then with people like [Joc Moore](#) and Hayden."

In the still-new All-American Room at the Iowa football facility, Ferentz then looked to the east toward Kinnick Stadium where a banner of Fry's likeness covers a portion of the brick facade.

"It took me 25 years, but I got a window," Ferentz said. "He's looking at me and Rita (Foley) every day."

*Contributing: Jason Kersey*

*(Top photo: Iowa Athletics)*



**Scott Dochternan** 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

Sort By: Most Likes



1

**Scott Dochterman** · Dec 22, 2019 · STAFF

@Vitaly P. Thanks so much! As great as Iowa's coaches who led other programs, the assistants who stayed provided the backbone. Bernie Wyatt was a tremendous recruiter in the New Jersey area. Carl Jackson was in Texas. Of course, Bill Brashier was to Hayden's staff what Norm Parker was to Kirk Ferentz's staff.

2

**Daniel D.** · Dec 18, 2019

Excellent article.

12

3

**[Hidden]** · Dec 21, 2019

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2

**Scott Dochterman** · Dec 22, 2019 · STAFF

@Jon J. Bump was the perfect AD at Iowa. Managed a head-strong staff to perfection. His life in athletics was incredible. Silver Football winner at Michigan. Participated in the Rose Bowl as a player, assistant coach, head coach, assistant AD and then AD.

2

**Scott Dochterman** · Dec 22, 2019 · STAFF

@Daniel D. Thanks so much, Daniel.

**Randy Y.** · Dec 19, 2019

Randy Y

I'm a Nebraska fan who will be pulling for the Hawkeyes to beat USC.

👍 9 🔄 2 ...

**Amit S.** · Dec 19, 2019

@Randy Y. Thank you.

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**[Hidden]** · Dec 21, 2019

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**Mitchell F.** · Dec 19, 2019

I grew up in the Deep South in the 80's. Hayden Fry was as much the face of Big 10 football to me as Bo Schembechler at Michigan. I knew nothing of Iowa's struggles in the 60's and 70's.

I just knew that Hawkeyes were always ranked, and they seemed to play in either the Rose or Holiday Bowl every year. This was also back when the AP only ranked 20 teams, and there were far less bowls.

His legacy will live on beyond just Iowa fans, his former players, and his incredible coaching tree.

👍 9 🔄 ...

**M Mark M.** · Dec 18, 2019  
I've always thought of Wisconsin as UI North, Oklahoma as UI South, and KSU as UI West because of Coach Fry.

👍 7   🔄 1   ⋮

**Scott Dochterman** · Dec 22, 2019 **STAFF**  
@Mark M. His imprint was everywhere. There never will be another one like him.

👍   🔄

**R Robert C.** · Dec 18, 2019  
Another fantastic article Scott. What a great week of writing. First the article on Deuce Hogan and now this one on Hayden. We can only hope our Hawks play as well next week as you have written this week!

👍 6   🔄 1   ⋮

**Scott Dochterman** · Dec 22, 2019 **STAFF**  
@Robert C. I'm truly flattered, Robert!

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**A Amit S.** · Dec 18, 2019  
Coach Fry was one of a kind, I doubt his like will ever be seen again. RIP Coach. We love ya & hope you enjoy the High Porch Picnic in Heaven.

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**Brian C.** · Dec 21, 2019  
Yes, Scott nailed it in this article. I was a freshman in high school in Cedar Rapids, IA when coach Fry came to Iowa. He started something that grew and got better and more fun every year. Hook 'em Hawks. Scratch where it itches. Thank you Coach Fry.

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**Z Zach A.** · Dec 18, 2019  
Well done.

👍 5   🔄 1   ⋮

**Scott Dochterman** · Dec 22, 2019 **STAFF**  
@Zach A. Thanks so much!

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👍 5   🔄 1   ⋮

**Scott Dochterman** · Dec 22, 2019 **STAFF**  
@Terry B. It's amazing when you start looking at the branches. Mike Leach, Lincoln Riley and Mark Mangino under Bob Stoops. Venables at K-State and OU. Alvarez's assistants. It's so impressive.

👍 2   🔄

**[Hidden]** · Dec 18, 2019  
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**Scott Dochterman** · Dec 22, 2019 **STAFF**  
@Tony D. Thanks so much, Tony. He was a true icon.

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**S** Scott L. · Dec 21, 2019  
I'm so glad you have a place where you can write such in depth pieces like this one. Great stuff as usual, Scott!  
👍 4 🔄 1 ...

**Scott Dochterman** · Dec 22, 2019 **STAFF**  
@Scott L. Thanks Scott!  
👍 🔄

**J** John A. · Dec 19, 2019  
Great story on a great coach.  
As a Michigan fan of that era, I'm keenly (painfully) aware of how Coach Fry turned the Hawkeyes around and helped open up the whole conference. But I didn't know much about his coaching tree.  
👍 3 🔄 2 ...

**[Hidden]** · Dec 21, 2019  
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**Scott Dochterman** · Dec 22, 2019 **STAFF**  
@John A. It's interesting how in Iowa's three Rose Bowl trips under Fry, the Hawkeyes beat Michigan by a combined five points. In 1981, it was 9-7 at Ann Arbor. In 1985, it was 12-10 at Kinnick in the No. 1 vs. No. 2 game. In 1990, it was 24-23 in Ann Arbor.  
👍 2 🔄

**N** Nels N. · Dec 20, 2019  
Great story on a tremendous coach, person, and Marine! Semper Fi Hayden!!! Nels Nord  
👍 3 🔄 1 ...

**Scott Dochterman** · Dec 22, 2019 **STAFF**  
@Nels N. Thanks!  
👍 🔄

**E** Elliot S. · Dec 19, 2019  
One of your best, Scott.  
👍 2 🔄 1 ...

**Scott Dochterman** · Dec 22, 2019 **STAFF**  
@Elliot S. Thanks!  
👍 🔄

**D** David G. · Dec 19, 2019  
It's crazy...just finished the article with tears in my eyes. God bless Coach Fry!  
👍 2 🔄 1 ...

**Scott Dochterman** · Dec 22, 2019 **STAFF**  
@David G. He was a one of a kind!  
👍 🔄

**R** Rogers A. · Dec 19, 2019  
Fantastic article. Coach Fry exemplified some of the best things about college football.  
👍 2 🔄 1 ...

**Scott Dochterman** · Dec 22, 2019 **STAFF**  
@Rogers A. He was a true icon. He changed the face of college football forever. Just a wonderful man with an enduring legacy.  
👍 🔄





