

COMMUNITY

‘If we have a second son, are we going to name him Hayden?’

Family with sons named Kirk and Hayden grieves loss of ‘part of our family’

By Vanessa Miller, The Gazette

With ice forming on the metal bleachers in what was then Dyche Stadium — home to the Northwestern Wildcats — Craig Brown during a frigid game in November 1995 recalls Coach Hayden Fry directing words of encouragement toward the shivering Hawkeye Marching Band.

Over the loud speaker, a bundled-up Fry thanked the band — for which Brown played the cymbals — and said he would have the ensemble come to every game if he could.

“You’re always good for six points,” Brown recalls Fry saying to the band — referencing the motivational push the Hawkeye Fight Song gave his players.

“I was ready to run through a brick wall when I heard that — he didn’t have to do that,” said Brown, now 44, of Cedar Rapids. “We loved Hayden. We played our hearts out, just like the players did ... Because he was special.”

Fast forward six years to December 2001 to find Brown, in a much warmer climate, graduated from Iowa and now riding Hawkeye Coach Kirk Ferentz’s coattails to a bowl game — this time as a news reporter for KCRG TV-9.

Brown, in covering the Alamo Bowl, interviewed a Hawkeye Marching Band saxophonist named Katie Newkirk.

“The story ran, and we hit it off after that,” he said.

So when in 2006 the now-married couple learned they were having a son, Brown assumed his wife’s suggestion they name the boy Kirk was a nod to one of the coaches that brought them together. She had meant it as a reference to her maiden name, but Brown liked the double meaning and joked, “If we have a second son, are we going to name him Hayden?”

Upon further reflection, the pair warmed to the idea of the “strong name,” taken from an ethical Iowa icon who shaped the state’s trajectory and inspired the character of those who call it home.

“We like Hayden, and we’re both big Hawkeye fans, and we already have a Kirk, so we’ve got to have a Hayden,” Brown recalled saying.

And on April 15, 2009, the Brown family welcomed Hayden Theo — just a few months before the city of Coralville hosted its first FRYfest, in honor of the legendary coach, who retired in 1998 after 20 seasons and later was inducted in the College Football Hall of Fame and Rose Bowl Hall of Fame.

At that first FRYfest, organizers issued a call for Hayden namesakes, and Katie Brown brought her then 4-month-old — along with dozens of others who named their son or daughter after the coach.

In one of several pictures,



Hayden Fry (center) poses with children named Hayden in his honor during the first FRYfest in Coralville in 2009. Sitting at Fry’s right is Katie Brown, holding 4-month-old Hayden. (Josh Schamberger photo)



In 1997, Craig Brown, 22, poses with Iowa Hawkeyes football coach Hayden Fry. (Craig Brown photo)



Kirk, Hayden and Brock Brown, the sons of Craig and Katie Brown, at an Iowa football game in fall 2019. (Craig Brown photo)



Craig and Katie Brown take a picture just before boarding the plane to the Rose Bowl in 2016. (Craig Brown photo)

Katie and baby Hayden can be seen sitting just right of Coach Fry.

“Hayden Fry was such an amazing coach and so influential,” Katie Brown said about their decision to honor him in the naming of a child.

When the couple became pregnant with a third boy due in late 2013 — some asked what Hawkeye legend they would venerate next.

“The doctor joked, literally as he was being born, what are you going to name the next one, Gable?” Craig Brown said. “My wife is a big wrestling fan and said, ‘Hmmm.’ I said, ‘Don’t even.’”

And they went with Brock, a spinoff of a family name.

But the couple couldn’t be more proud of their sons’ namesakes — with Brown recalling the heroic stature Fry established in the state and nation and the personal effect he had on his family, specifically when he was a kid.

He recalls a game his father

attended against No. 7 ranked Nebraska in 1981 — a year after the Cornhuskers had pummeled Iowa 57-0 and two years after Fry took over the Iowa program in 1979. Nebraska fans who made the trip to Iowa City were jeering Brown’s dad about the beating they expected the unranked Hawkeyes to take.

But Iowa pulled out a 10-7 win, and Brown remembers his father saying he had never been prouder in his life.

“He knew right then that we had a special bond with Hayden Fry, he had a special bond with this state,” Brown said.

Before Fry, the Hawkeyes had been invited to just two bowl games — the most recent being the Rose Bowl in 1958, more than 20 years before. In just his second year at the helm, Fry returned the Hawks to the Rose Bowl, creating a carnival-type of energy across the state.

“It was Disney World in

Iowa City,” he said. “All of a sudden, we were beating Nebraska.”

Over his 20-year stint as Hawkeye head coach, Fry’s squad achieved bowl invites in all but six years. And Brown said that reliability was part of the reason he joined the band.

“Hayden was one of the reasons I wanted to do the marching band,” he said. “We knew we were going to a bowl game. When you signed up for band, you got a bowl trip — because of Hayden.”

The thread Fry wove through Brown’s life — in electrifying his childhood, inspiring his collegiate trajectory, which later nudged him toward his would-be wife and the naming of their boys — continues today.

“There was something special that we connect with our son,” he said.

And so when Fry died last week at age 90, Brown said the family grieved.

“It was a deep loss, for our family and for our entire state,” he said.

When the family gathered over the weekend for the holidays, they paused for a moment of silence.

“We all felt like Hayden was part of our family — for all the

things he did for our state,” Brown said. “And it was more than the wins and losses. I’m proud of the great ethical man he was.”

He was a pioneer in the sport’s racial integration and launched the America Needs Farmers campaign — hitting close to home for his wife’s farming family.

“I remember going to many games with my dad growing up,” Katie Brown said. “But I also remember many games where he listened to them in the combine harvesting, in the grain truck hauling corn, or blaring from the pickup radio eating supper on the tailgate in the field before hauling loads of grain.”

“My dad always spoke highly of Coach Fry and his efforts to put a national eye on the importance of supporting America’s farmers,” Katie Brown said.

He stepped out on limbs not everyone would brave.

“More often than not, he did the right thing when other people wouldn’t,” Craig Brown said. “He had a great impact ... and his spirit lives on in our son, and in all of our hearts.”

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