



Ronnie Harmon breaks loose for a long run.

FOOTBALL

Ronnie Harmon is one of the greatest Hawkeyes of all time, but don't remind Iowa fans of that

Pat Harty Follow @PatHarty chuck-long, Don Patterson, Hayden Fry, ronnie-harmon April 21, 2020

By Pat Harty

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Some of you, especially those still bitter after 35 years, might resent me saying that Ronnie Harmon would rank near the top of the list of former Hawkeye stars I would most want to interview.

Harmon was unique on and off the football field during his four years as a Hawkeye.

He was an incredible talent, but also an enigma.

Harmon was controversial, and forever tainted, due to his unraveling at the 1986 Rose Bowl where he fumbled four times and dropped a potential touchdown pass during a 45-28 loss to UCLA.

That one disastrous afternoon in Pasadena, for many Hawkeye fans, erased what Harmon had accomplished during his spectacular career.

And that's a shame.

I'm not here to tell you how you should feel about Ronnie Harmon.

It's just sad and unfortunate that so many Iowa fans now think so little of Harmon or in some cases, they despise him, due to what happened in the Rose Bowl, because that means one of the greatest players in program history is detached and alienated from a very receptive, appreciative and loyal fan base.

Harmon came to Iowa from New York City in 1982 as part of Bernie Wyatt's recruiting pipeline to the East Coast, and Harmon would go on to become a transcendent talent at running back and receiver under Hayden Fry.

Harmon is neither Iowa's all-time leading rusher nor its all-time leading receiver, but he probably could have been either if he had just stayed at one position.

But he played receiver during his first two seasons at Iowa and running back in his last two, and he played both positions at an elite level.

Harmon often left defenders grabbing for air, or tripping over themselves, with his incredible ability to change directions without slowing down.

He was sort of like Gale Sayers, poetry in motion.

Combine that with his ability as a receiver and Harmon was the ultimate weapon as a Hawkeye.

"Ronnie Harmon made me look a lot better on a lot of throws," said former Iowa quarterback Chuck Long, who played with Harmon for four seasons at Iowa from 1982-85 and finished runner-up for the 1985 Heisman Trophy.

Long made that comment on KCJJ radio about a year ago during an interview in which he raved about Harmon's talent.

Long had nothing but good things to say about Harmon, but he also hadn't spoken with him for years and had no contact information.

Former Iowa assistant coach Don Patterson also spoke about Harmon in the highest regard during a recent interview on the Alhawkkeys radio show and podcast, and Patterson disagrees with those who are convinced that Harmon helped to fix the 1986 Rose Bowl by losing four fumbles.

Patterson said he was convinced that Harmon didn't fumble on purpose after seeing how much Harmon was suffering in the locker room in the moments after the game.

"I know there are a lot of Hawkeye fans that still think that Ronnie Harmon threw the game, but you'll never convince me of that and I'll tell you why," said Patterson, who was also the head coach at Western Illinois from 1999 to 2009. "In the locker room after the game, I'm trying to think of what to tell Ronnie Harmon because he had such a great career, and all I could think of to tell him was, Ronnie, I'm going to really enjoy watching you play on Sunday next fall. And he looked at me with tears in his eyes, and he said, coach, after today, they're not going to want me."

Harmon, obviously, was wrong about his future as the Buffalo Bills would go on to select him the first round of the 1986 NFL Draft. He then played 12 seasons in the NFL and became one of the greatest all-purpose and third-down backs in league history.

For Patterson, the eyes tell the story about whether Harmon fumbled on purpose in the Rose Bowl.

Iowa fans think that, but I don't think so, and the advantage I have over them is I had a chance to look him right in the eye after the game and I'm convinced it was just great play by UCLA," Patterson said.

Hayden Fry also defended Harmon in the years after the Rose Bowl, saying that it was just one of those fluke things that happened at the worst possible time.

Fry and Patterson also gave UCLA defenders credit for knocking the ball loose, attributing it to sound preparation and execution.

"It's just football," Patterson said. "I don't think there was any way that Ronnie intentionally fumbled the ball on that day."

There probably isn't anything that Harmon could say that would sway opinion, and that probably is part of the reason you don't hear much from him these days.

He also never seemed real comfortable in the spotlight, so that could be another reason.

I know several people who played with Harmon at Iowa and they described him as somebody who mostly kept to himself, sort of distant, private and aloof, but that he was always ready to play.

It would be hard to justify doing an interview with Ronnie Harmon and not asking at least one question about the Rose Bowl debacle, and he has to realize that

Harmon coached running backs under Patterson for one season at Western Illinois in 2003, but that arrangement didn't last very long.

Patterson said he had to let Harmon go after just one season because Harmon was too critical of his players and had unrealistic expectations as a former star player.

"After being with him for a year, I said, Ronnie, I can't allow you to coach this way anymore, and he said, what do you mean, coach?" Patterson said. "And I said, not everybody is talented like you. You have to understand, don't be so critical of your players when they can't do things. You have to build them up. You don't tear them down."

"And Ronnie, the game came so easy for him, it was hard for him to understand that other players might not be that talented."

As a member of the Buffalo Bills, Harmon dropped a potential game-winning pass from Jim Kelly in a 1989 AFC Divisional playoff game with nine seconds left in the fourth quarter.

Some remember that one drop more than Harmon's success, which includes being the only player in NFL history to average 4.5 yards per carry on 600 rushing attempts, and 10 yards per catch on 550 receptions. He is also one of only five running backs to ever gain over 10,000 all-purpose yards and have less than 20 fumbles.

That's some serious stuff, and yet, more people seem to remember the bad than the good in Harmon's case.

Harmon's association with sports agents also didn't help his reputation with Iowa fans.

Harmon testified in 1989 that he played football his senior year at Iowa even though he was on academic probation, and that he believed he was in violation of NCAA regulations.

Harmon was a witness in the trial of New York sports agents Norby Walters and Lloyd Bloem. Harmon also disclosed that he secretly tape-recorded Walters as the agent attempted to persuade Harmon to hire Walters as his agent.

Harmon's testimony shed a negative light on the University of Iowa, and on the Iowa football program, and some fans still resent Harmon for that, and understandably so.

It appears the wounds are too deep to heal in this case, and that's unfortunate because I would love to ask Harmon which musical act or performer he would pick to fill Kinrick Stadium, which is how we at KCJJ radio usually conclude our interviews with former Hawkeye legends.

I'd love to hear Harmon talk about Wyatt's influence on him, and what it was like to play for Fry, and for Bill Snyder, and with Chuck Long.

Harmon was fortunate to have played during the glory years under Fry, but Harmon had much to do with that glory.

He also helped convince his younger brother, Kevin Harmon, to be a Hawkeye, and Kevin was a pretty talented running back in his own right.

Kevin wasn't Ronnie, but Kevin was a key contributor.

Should Ronnie Harmon ever happen to read this, I just want him to know that we'd be thrilled to have him as a guest on the AllHawkeyes radio show, but that we would have to address the Rose Bowl because it was suspicious.

As for my opinion about what happened in the 1986 Rose Bowl, I'd like to believe that Harmon didn't fumble on purpose, or intentionally drop a potential touchdown pass, and that it was just football as Patterson and Fry both said, because that sure beats the alternative.

