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Los Angeles Times

FryAid : University of Iowa Football Coach Hayden Fry Has a Bumper Crop That's Making Iowans Forget All About Their Woes for a Couple of Hours Every Saturday . . . Uh . . . Fry-Day

BY RANDY HARVEY OCT. 28, 1985 12 AM PT



IOWA CITY — The cynics here say that if Hayden Fry really wanted to help **Iowa's** farmers, he would have been on stage with his fellow Texans, Waylon and Willie and the boys, at the Farm Aid Concert over in Champaign, or that Fry would have donated money to the cause instead of spending \$3.5 million of the **Iowa** athletic department's money for an indoor-practice facility.

But the cynics are greatly outnumbered here when the subject is the University of **Iowa's** No. 1-ranked football team and its coach, John Hayden Fry, who has become almost as important to this state as John Deere.

On a recent Sunday morning, the day after **Iowa** beat Michigan, 12-10, in a game between the nation's first and second-ranked teams, Father Henry Greiner of St. Mary's Catholic Church in **Iowa** City, stood before his congregation and thanked God for Fry and the **Hawkeyes**, who, the priest said, have been a beacon of light to **Iowans** in their darkest days since the Depression.

"We're experiencing an unbelievable crisis out here in the heartland," Greiner said later. "We are not only in danger of losing our farms, but we are losing a whole way of life. In the small, rural towns, there is a tradition of strong family life and strong community life that is becoming a thing of the past, and *no one seems to care*.

"Amid all of this pessimism and real hopelessness are Hayden Fry and the Hawkeyes. I'm the first to admit that college athletics in this land are overemphasized when considering our overall educational needs, but Hayden Fry and his football team have brought us relief, an Alka Seltzer to our upset stomachs. They have given us something to be proud of in Iowa."

No less appreciative, if somewhat less reverent, is **Iowa's** young Republican governor, Terry Branstad, who said, "Being No. 1 in something other than bank closings is a positive thing for **Iowa**."

If some of that Hawkeye magic rubs off on Branstad, so be it. During a time of economic distress, when almost everyone in **Iowa** has been adversely affected by the farm crisis, he is preparing to run for re-election next year. So is it any wonder that Branstad is trying to distance himself from Ronald Reagan, whose farm policies are unpopular here, while at the same time getting as close as possible to Hayden Fry?

Even for the governor, that is no simple task. Immediately after the victory over Michigan, thousands of fans stampeded onto the Kinnick Stadium field, practically burying several of the Hawkeyes and injuring a backup quarterback. One student, who led the charge on one of the goal posts, later was charged with inciting a riot. Fry was escorted to the safety of the locker room by four uniformed security guards, including the Johnson County sheriff. Branstad and the University of Iowa's president had only their swivel hips to assist them in escaping from the field.

The irony is that no one needs protection less than Fry in **Iowa**, where bumper stickers proclaim, "If This is Saturday, It Must Be Fry-Day."

Not since Prof. Harold Hill, the conniving bandleader in **Iowan** Meredith Willson's "The Music Man," has anyone so overwhelmed the people of this state. Fry, 56, also has been called conniving, but, like the Music Man, he produced.

After being fired at SMU and ignored at North Texas State, Fry came to **Iow**a in 1979 to take over a program that hadn't had a winning record in 17 years. Less than three years later, on Jan. 1, 1982, he had the **Hawkeye**s in the Rose Bowl for the first time since 1959. In three seasons since, they have been to three more bowl games, beating the horns off Texas, 55-17, in last year's Freedom Bowl at Anaheim.

This season, the Hawkeyes (7-0) have been No. 1 for four straight weeks, unanimous in both major wire-service polls last week, and are closer than ever to achieving Fry's goal.

"It really looks like we have one of the better programs in the nation," he said earlier this season. "We can compete with anybody in the country. I'm happy here at **Iowa**, but I haven't done the job I came here to do, which is to win a national championship."

Iowa's fans are dressed for the occasion. In almost every community outside of Ames, the home of archrival **Iowa** State, the dominant color is black and gold, much of it sold by Fry himself.

When he arrived in **Iowa** City seven years ago, he wondered why more **Iowa** fans didn't wear black and gold. If Nebraska fans wear red and Texas fans wear orange, he figured **Iowa** fans should wear their school colors. So he established the Hawkeye Marketing Group, which sold 62 items--from jackets and sweaters to playing cards and ash trays, all of them black and gold and bearing a Hawkeye logo--in Hayden Fry Shops at J.C. Penney stores throughout **Iowa**.





In his first year at **Iowa**, he earned as much from hawking the **Hawkeye**s as from his salary, \$46,000 at the time. But in Fry's second season, while **Iowa** was stumbling toward a 4-7 record, the media suggested that the coach spend more time coaching and less time promoting his products. It was the death of a salesman. He gave up the business, but a tradition was born. If you don't wear black and gold in **Iowa** now, you're branded as an **Iowa** State Cyclone fan, a Communist or both.

Loyalty to the Hawkeyes is more than sweater deep. In an attempt to meet the demand for tickets, Kinnick Stadium was expanded from 60,000 to 66,000 in 1983. But the ticket office still turns down thousands of requests at **Iowa**, where 37 of 38 home games have been sold out since Fry became the coach. There were 66,350 fans at the **Iowa**-Michigan game, the largest crowd ever to see a sporting event in the state.

Even though their generosity isn't rewarded with a priority for tickets, **Iowa** boosters are expected to contribute \$3.5 million to the athletic department this year. **Iowa** last year became the first Big Ten university to raise more than \$3 million in contributions for its athletic department.

"That's not bad for an economy that's in trouble," Gov. Branstad said.

The feeling Iowans have for the Hawkeyes is equal parts affection and gratitude.

"Most of the nation doesn't know the difference between **Iowa** and Idaho and Ohio," Branstad said. "It's not that we have an image problem as much as it is that we have no image. But the kind of publicity the football team is receiving nationally raises the visibility of **Iowa**."

Others will tell you that **Iow**a has been visible enough lately, pointing to headlines around the nation about farm economics. About 13.5% of **Iowa's** 3 million people live on farms, more than any state other than the Dakotas. There is a moratorium on foreclosures, but when they resume Branstad said he fears "a very, very bloody mess."

People here say they appreciate Jessica Lange's movie, "Country," and Willie Nelson's Farm Aid concert because they had good intentions, but both brought attention to **Iowa's** failings. The **Hawkeye**s bring attention to one of the state's triumphs.

In that, Iowans can rejoice for at least a few hours each Saturday, on FryDays.

"The farmers right now, bless their hearts, haven't had one bad day; they've had three years worth of bad days," Fry said in an interview last week. "These are Czechs and Norwegians and Irish and Germans, and they've got tremendous pride. Now, some of them are just hangin' on.

"But they can watch on television or listen on the radio and say, 'How 'bout them Hawks?' We're like a push and pull doctor. You may go to the doctor because one leg's shorter than another, and he'll push and pull on it. When you leave, that leg is still going to be shorter than the other. But you're going to feel better for six or seven hours. You'll feel good while it lasts."

Fry as a country doctor? Consider for a moment, if you will, the "American Gothic" painting by Grant Wood, who lived about 25 miles from the University of **Iowa** campus in Cedar Rapids. Picture the stoic farmer and his stoic wife standing side-by-side, and then place the square-jawed Hayden Fry in between, his arms around them, blessing their hearts. Fry with his neatly styled hair and dark mustache and rose-colored glasses and black-and-gold windbreaker and custom-made snakeskin boots and \$10,000 diamond-studded Rolex watch with a solid gold band and ring to match.

He looks like he would be more at home on a yacht in Marina del Rey than on a farm outside Sioux City. But then he opens his mouth and out comes a West Texas twang and homilies such as, "We'll scratch where it itches," or, "He didn't come to town on a wagon load of wood," and you expect to hear Fry start singing about being country when country wasn't cool."

Asked last week if anyone has accused him of exaggerating his down-home image, Fry laughed and said, "Only my friends."

That's not entirely true. Ever since Fry arrived in **Iowa** City, he has had critics who call him a con-artist and a snake-oil salesman. He provided them with all the evidence they needed during his first season here, when he said he was a second cousin to Lyndon Johnson. Two years later, the Des Moines Register checked with the LBJ Library in Austin, which has thoroughly researched the former President's genealogy and discovered no John Hayden Frys hanging from the tree. Unabashed, Fry said he never checked for himself but that his family *told* him he was kin to Johnson.

Fry's friends say that if you peel away the good ol' boy exterior, underneath is a genuine good ol' boy.

"When you talk to him, you feel like you're out in the fields, chewing on a stick of wheat and shooting the breeze, talking about the weather or cattle or poker," said the U.S. Olympic Committee publicist Bob Condron, who worked for Fry at SMU in the early '70s. "You always felt good after talking to him."

But when asked whether Fry was the homespun country philosopher at SMU, Condron said: "If he was, nobody noticed because a lot of people down there talk like that. I think he might have picked up a couple of those sayings from Darrell Royal."

Not even flinching when he hears himself described as a manipulator, Fry doesn't deny he is an actor on a stage. He calls it "selling the sizzle instead of the steak."

He said he learned that from his father, a butcher. Hayden Fry Sr. died in a taxi cab while coming home for lunch one day when his son, an only child, was 14. Living in Odessa, a oil boomtown of about 90,000 at the south end of the Texas Panhandle, Fry's mother went to work taking tickets at a movie theater. Young Hayden added to the family's modest income as an oil-field roughneck when he wasn't going to school, where he was a star quarterback. In the 1947 Odessa High School annual, Fry's senior year, he revealed his ambition was to "hunt treasures."

Fry was a reserve quarterback at Baylor, where he majored in psychology. His fascination with the subject continued during 17 months as a Marine Corps captain in Japan, where took a course in the psychology of religion at the University of Tokyo to "gain an insight into the depth of the Oriental mind."

That was not just a time for reflection. When he was an oilfield roughneck, his job was to turn over rocks and kill the rattlesnakes underneath. That taught him how to function under stress, a lesson that served him well as a hand-to-hand combat instructor in the Marines. But the Marines also taught him neatness and order. A complex man was developing.

Upon his discharge, Fry rejected his one-time ambition of becoming a psychiatrist and returned to Odessa to coach high school football. He is best remembered there for toting a record player to the dressing room before games and playing stirring marches, such as "Battle Hymn of the Republic," "The Marine Corps Hymn," and "Dixie."

In 1962, at age 33, he became the youngest head coach ever at SMU. During 11 years there, he was responsible for bringing in the Southwest Conference's first black assistant coach and first black scholarship athlete, Jerry LeVias. Signing LeVias was particularly controversial, inspiring hate mail and death threats for both the player and coach. SMU fans became more enlightened after LeVias became an All-America. "Every time he scored a touchdown, all my good friends thought he became whiter and whiter," Fry said.

But Fry had only three winning seasons. Even though Condron said he believes the Mustangs had turned the corner in 1972, when they finished 7-4, Fry was fired with one game remaining that season. No official reason was announced, but he said he believes it was because he wouldn't cater to the university's prominent boosters. "I wouldn't drop everything and go to the Bahamas with them," he said.

For a man with such a high profile, Fry goes to great lengths to protect his privacy. He and his wife, both in their second marriages, live near a reservoir several miles outside of **Iowa** City and are seldom seen around town. On the few occasions when they socialize, it is only with good friends. The conversation, Fry said, is seldom about football.

After his unceremonious dismissal at SMU, Fry was hired at North Texas State, located about 30 miles north of Dallas in Denton. In an attempt to maintain the football program's major-college status, the administration hired Fry as an attentiongetter.

In Fry's six seasons there, the Eagles had victories over Tennessee and SMU and tied Texas. They won 10 games one season and 9 the next. But they didn't attract the attention of either the bowl scouts or the networks.

"We couldn't even get on the radio," Fry said.

So when Iowa called, Fry listened.

"I'd always wanted to coach at someplace that was the University of," he said. "I would've gone to the University of Iowa-Jima."

Upon arriving in **Iowa**, Fry discovered better players than he expected, but he said they needed an attitude adjustment. He began applying the psychology he had learned.

The first thing he did was order uniforms that matched those of the Pittsburgh Steelers, who were coming off another Super Bowl championship. Then he hired a commercial artist to redesign another logo, replacing lovable Herky the Hawk, who had seen too many losing seasons, with a more ferocious Tiger Hawk. "I don't even know if there's such a thing as a Tiger Hawk," Fry said.

He told his players to watch their manners, ordering them to say "yes sir" and "no sir" and "thank you" and to dress for success. He even changed the manner in which they enter the field before a game, telling them that running out of the tunnel, jumping up and down and high-fiving each other was "an insecure type of energy." He told them to trot onto the field, calm and confident.

Fry also had the walls in the visitors' dressing room at Kinnick Stadium painted pink, the most passive color, with purple trim. Even if the color combination doesn't make opponents play like Shirley Temple, it might distract them. Several hours before Michigan's game there this season, Coach Bo Schembechler sent student managers to the dressing room to cover the walls with white paper mache.

Fry wanted the Hawkeyes to begin thinking like winners, a point he drove home after the second game of his first season. They lost to Oklahoma, 21-6, but had played about as well as they could and were accepting congratulations in the dressing room afterward from family and friends. Fry exploded, telling the players he would punch the next one he saw who had a smile on his face.

"Losing is losing," he said. "These kids have been babied and petted and pampered so much when they lose that it makes me sick."

The next week, after losing to Nebraska, 24-21, no one dared smile.

A little more than two years later, Iowa was in the Rose Bowl.

Now, the Hawkeyes not only win, they expect to win.

That hasn't taken the edge off Fry. Last year, he threatened to quit unless the university agreed to free \$3.5 million of the athletic department's money to build an indoor-practice facility. At a time when many **Iowans** are worried about whether they're going to be able to keep the roofs over their heads, many people considered Fry's demand frivolous and insensitive.

"If egos were dollars, Hayden Fry would have an indoor-practice facility within a matter of minutes," one reader wrote to the Des Moines Register.

A man who had spit in the eyes of rattlesnakes, fought hand-to-hand with Marines and defied the color barrier in the Southwest wasn't going to back down.

"I'm not a rich man, but I have enough money invested so that I don't have to coach football for my bread and butter," Fry said. "That gives me leverage.

"I have to shake the tree every now and then. Sometimes, I step on toes a little bit. I don't like to do that, but I got my facility."

During the game against Michigan, the Wolverines' only touchdown was set up by a 60-yard kickoff return. At halftime on a chilled, rainy afternoon, Fry sent his specialty teams into the indoor facility to work on their kickoff coverage.

If people are still critical of the money spent for the indoor facility, they aren't writing letters to the newspapers. As long as the Hawkeyes are No. 1, Fry is above criticism.

"I remember President Eisenhower made a statement once," Fry said. "Somebody asked him why he ever bought that farm of his in Gettysburg. He told them that all his life he wanted to take a piece of ground that really hadn't been cared for or cultivated or fertilized or watered and work with everything he had and leave it in better condition than he found it.

"It's a simple statement, but I think maybe many men in life, regardless of their profession, have that inner urge to make a winner of a loser. That's the American way of life, I think. There's no challenge too big for anyone.

"You get into a program where you can't improve a hell of a lot, go in and follow somebody like Bud Wilkinson or Darrell Royal, and if you lose one game more than your predecessor did, they'll be asking for your head.

"I've been a poor boy all my life, and I guess I fit into a poor situation better than a lot of people."

Have you found treasures, he was asked.

"I found them here," he said. "Maybe they weren't the treasures I had in mind when I wrote that, but being No. 1 and having a chance to go to the Rose Bowl is probably as close as I'm ever going to get."

