

Hayden Fry, My Hero

Who the heck is this Hayden Fry guy?

You may be forgiven for asking this question if you moved to town after 1998, Hayden's last season after 20 years as head coach of the U of I Hawkeye Football team.

As a lifetime Iowa City resident and Hawkeye football fan, it is indelibly burned into my memory what gridiron life was like before Hayden Fry. Seventeen consecutive seasons without a winning record. *Seventeen*. In the sports section of the Press-Citizen, the word "hapless" accompanied the word "Hawkeyes" the way you used to associate the words "disgruntled" and "postal worker."

It must be hard for relative newcomers to comprehend what it used to be like. The University of Iowa often found its football program ranked in the "Bottom Ten." Students tore down goal posts when we succeeded in losing by less than two touchdowns. Small children dreamed of growing up to be members of the Hawkeye Marching Band.

Every few years, the UI Athletic department would drag in a new head coach through the revolving gridiron door. Expectations would temporarily soar - only to be dashed - and at least three (formerly) good coaches had their careers derailed by the Hawkeye curse.

Our teams were the sacrificial lambs - and a popular homecoming opponent - on almost every other Big 10 teams' schedule. The only university we had an even chance against was brainy (but wimpy) Northwestern, whose football fortunes at that time were tragically dimmer than our own. When they were losing by 35 points, their cheerleaders would shout, "That's all right! That's okay! You'll all work for US some day!"

Our football program may have been a monument to futility, but year after year the fans inexplicably filled the stands. Like lemmings to the sea, Hawkeye faithful marched glumly into the stadium on home football Saturdays already knowing their pre-ordained fate.

Finally, in 1979 the UI Athletic Department took a break from trying to schedule Northwestern for our next ten Homecomings and found time to hire Hayden Fry. Expectations were low, but soon a miraculous transformation took place, and we began to win (OMG) football games. What followed was an impressive string of bowl games - who'd have thunk it - even before there was such a thing as the San Diego County Credit Union Poinsettia Bowl.

Later in his career, fans loudly critical of coach Fry soon discovered whether or not they were sitting within arm's length of me. To me, the man is God. For my money he could have had his job as long as he wanted it. I didn't care that he talked kind of funny. I wouldn't have cared if he wanted to coach in his underwear. But then he retired, and it hasn't been the same.

I Kirk Ferentz just fine, but there will never be another Hayden Fry.

Dave Parsons will be playing trombone in the UI Alumni pep band, participating in the classic car show and riding one of 143 Harleys in the commemorative parade during FryFest on September 4th.