

TRUE

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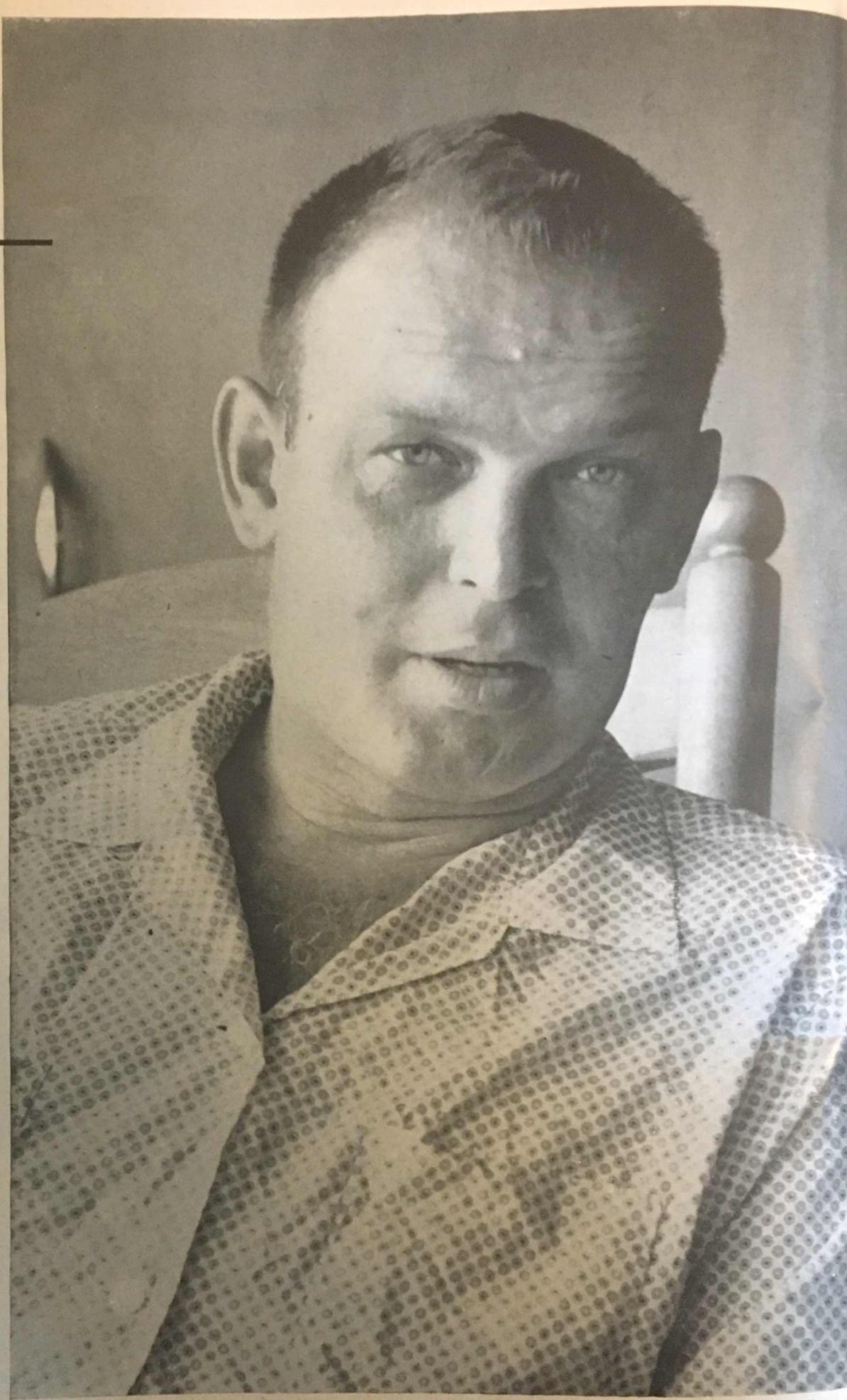


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Forest Evashevski: FOOTBALL FIREBRAND

With a demoralized team and a hostile alumni, Evashevski's job as Iowa coach looked hopeless. Yet within five years, the Hawkeyes were Big 10 and Rose Bowl champs. Here's how this tough, outspoken ex-blocking back set the Midwest on fire

By JIM ZABEL

IOWA CITY

When Tom Harmon emerged from his widely publicized plane crash in China during World War II, followed by an equally harrowing escape through Japanese lines, he was handed a message from his former running mate at Michigan, Forest Evashevski.

"How did you make it back without me to block for you?" Evashevski had cabled.

Football fans of that day would have considered it a legitimate question. Together, from 1938 through 1940, Harmon and Evashevski formed one of the most remarkable running and blocking combinations in modern football. Behind Evashevski's shattering interference and smart signal calling, Harmon not only made All America, but achieved such greatness that his number, 98, was officially retired by Michigan University.

In retrospect, this "one-two" relationship seems significant. It marked one of the rare occasions when Forest Evashevski willingly played a secondary role to anyone, in anything. Even as second man, however, the Polish lad from Detroit won himself a place in football's front ranks. Outstanding ball carriers come and go, but no other blocking back of his time will be so long remembered as Evashevski.

Being "first" is both a habit and an obsession with Evashevski. He was an honor



Evashevski works full time. Even at an alumni luncheon he dopes out strategy—here with backfield coach Bump Elliott.



He makes his boys work and they love it because it means victory—like this 1956 7-0 upset over Minnesota.

FOOTBALL FIREBRAND

student at Michigan, winning the Big 10 scholarship medal his last year. He captained the football team in 1940, was president of his senior class, and was rated a definite major-league baseball prospect. Fritz Crisler, his former coach, recalls that as a sophomore "Evy was one of the toughest, smartest and most determined kids I'd ever seen."

At 39, there is little to indicate any appreciable change in Evashevski. The fact that he came from the wrong side of the social tracks, gained fame and financial security early in life, and married into one of Michigan's most prominent families, has mellowed him only slightly.

"Dear Coach," a leading alumnus wrote Evashevski after his first Iowa team had lost several games in 1952, "I may not know much about football. But I think . . ." and he went on to give a three-page account of his views on how to win football games.

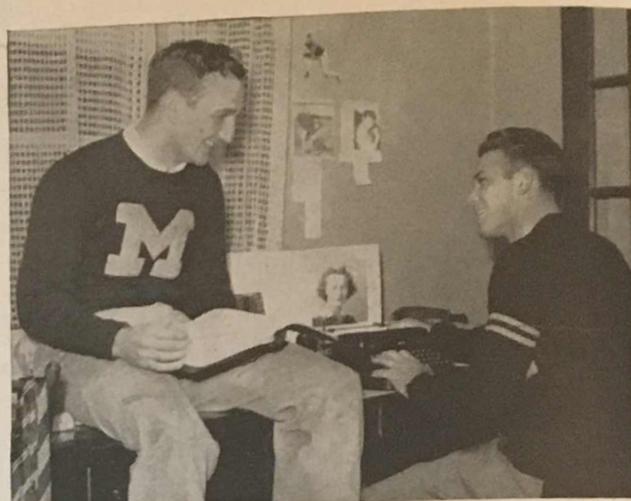
"Dear Sir," his answer read. "You were right in your first sentence. Sincerely, Forest Evashevski."

The direct approach extends also to Evashevski's humor. "We're going to have a football team at Iowa," he told a staid faculty meeting in his first appearance on the campus, "if we have to reach into the student body to get it."

The over-zealous fan is a favorite Evashevski target. One such bubbling partisan approached him before the 1954 season to inquire about prospects. "Do you think this year's team will be as good as the one that tied Notre Dame last fall?" he asked.

"The talent's not as good," Evashevski said. "But the coaching is better."

Bluntness, to Evashevski, is the shortest and most logical



In 1940 Evashevski, right, cleared the way for Tom Harmon's touchdown romps. They ran and roomed together.

route between two points. When he first arrived at Iowa he was questioned about his running feud with Biggie Munn of Michigan State, which was general knowledge around the conference.

"I could make a lot of excuses," Evashevski replied. "The truth is we don't like each other."

Such candor may not always be endearing, but in Iowa, where the corn grows tall and football prospects were traditionally low, it quickly earned Evashevski respect—which by now has reached almost legendary proportions. Is it any wonder? After half a century of bitter, unrelenting defeat, Iowans still find it hard to believe that Evashevski's Hawkeyes are the defending Big 10 and Rose Bowl champions, and are rated among the top powers in football today. The 1956 season produced the greatest Iowa record in 51 years, the first undisputed Big 10 title in 34 years, the most decisive victory over arch rival Notre Dame (40 points) and the first Rose Bowl championship. Evashevski was named "Coach of the Year" by the American Football Writers Association, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Detroit Times*, the *Washington Touchdown Club*, the *Kansas City Rockne Club* and the *Pittsburgh Dapper Dan Club*.

Coming on the heels of such heady events as two consecutive Big 10 basketball titles, a National Open Golf Championship (Jack Fleck) and a Miss Universe crown (Carol Morris), it was enough to make any Iowan stand up and out-shout the most ardent Texan. As one prominent Iowa business leader put it, "We've been trying to get on the map for years with corn and hogs—now, Evashevski comes along and does it overnight."

There is little question the job could ever have been done without Evashevski's block-busting approach. Weighing a solid 220 pounds, standing 6 feet 1, with rugged features, a handsome face and a deep penetrating voice, Evashevski today appears every bit as formidable as he did 17 years ago when he was the most destructive force in college football. His directness brings out an interesting study in contrasts.

An intelligent and witty conversationalist, he refuses to backslap. He is dedicated to victory and to success, but without hesitation will violate coaching's most sacred tenet by publicly telling the alumni [Continued on page 26]



Those broad grins had a reason. Evashevski's Hawkeyes had just won the 1957 Rose Bowl game from Oregon State.

[Continued from page 24]

to go to hell. He can build team morale to a savage pitch for a game, yet be the calmest man on the field himself. A gifted speaker, he can break up a student pep rally with a sly remark or bit of self-ridicule, but can hold an audience for an evening with a serious discussion of the values of athletics. He is a fierce competitor and perfectionist on the football field; a devoted father and husband off the field. With success and personal happiness already assured, he drives himself—and in turn his assistants and team—harder than ever before.

During practice for the Purdue game last fall, one veteran player commented to a visiting newsman: "If you even get up slow in scrimmage, he slaps you back on the third team."

Actually, Evashevski is not the growling, scowling, ruthless technician on the practice field that this statement might suggest. He can be tough, if the occasion warrants, but his general manner is soft-spoken. He jokes with his players in lighter moments; keeps his practices highly organized and fast moving, and shares the emotions of the squad, through victory and defeat, as intently as if he were one of them. His approach is based on mutual respect, which sometimes seems to border on a father-son relationship. His rock-'em sock-'em "hit 'em 'til they bleed" brand of football demands much of a player, and he almost always gets it.

In turn, he gives much. Few coaches put in more hours on the job. He genu-

inely likes his players and treats them as men both off the field and on. They take pride in coming through for him. In five years, he never has had to kick a boy off the squad for a training violation. He has helped many of his players get good coaching jobs after graduation, and has advised others on various phases of their careers. When Calvin Jones, Iowa's great All-America guard who captained the 1955 team, was killed in a Canadian airliner crash last December, Evashevski took it as a severe personal loss. "It couldn't have hit him any harder if it had been a member of his family," one of his assistants reported. "He thinks an awful lot of those kids."

Evashevski is a complete realist about football. "Regardless of what the educators may say," he declared in a speech recently, "the only purpose for putting on a football uniform is to win. If I ever go on the field with any other idea, I will quit coaching. When these kids leave me, I want them to be winners—whether they go into business, the professions or stay in athletics. The desire to win is the greatest thing a young man can have."

Evashevski should know something about winning. His Michigan teams lost only four games in three years, and the 1940 club, which he captained, allowed its opponents a total of 34 points for the season—a defensive performance no Michigan team has equaled since.

This winning tradition began to rub off almost as soon as Evashevski arrived at Iowa. Within two years he had raised the school from a football non-entity to

a place among the top 10 in the nation. How successful his firebrand approach has been can best be demonstrated by the fact that, before he even put a team on the field, Iowans were worried about losing him to another school. He subsequently signed a 10-year contract, which still has seven years to go.

Whether he remains for the run of the contract, he already has given Iowa football its greatest moments—climaxed, of course, by last season's championship and Rose Bowl victory. In 1952, there was the 8-0 "upset of the year" over Ohio State, which kept the Buckeyes from going to the Rose Bowl; 1953 produced the 26-0 win over Purdue, the 27-0 rout of Minnesota, and the startling 14-14 tie with Notre Dame, which was unbeaten and fighting for the national title. It was this latter game, more than any other perhaps, that raised Iowa to football prominence for the first time in more than a decade.

With its famed "clock stopping" incidents and fierce play, the game still ranks as one of the most controversial and thrilling in modern football. Twice Notre Dame had to come from behind to score in the final two seconds of the first half, and the last six seconds of the second half. Each time, the Irish were accused of using "injury faking" tactics to stop the clock before the scoring play. The argument raged for months.

Of all the parties to the conflict, the calmest appeared to be Evashevski. "Much has been said of the so-called fainting incident at South Bend last fall," he said. "That was nothing. Three of our boys fainted in the dressing room before they even got on the field."

Evashevski's restraint, if it can be called that, was more the product of detachment than of will power. Past events excite him little; ethical arguments, even less. He likes nothing better than to chide the weeping, arm-swinging fanatics of his profession.

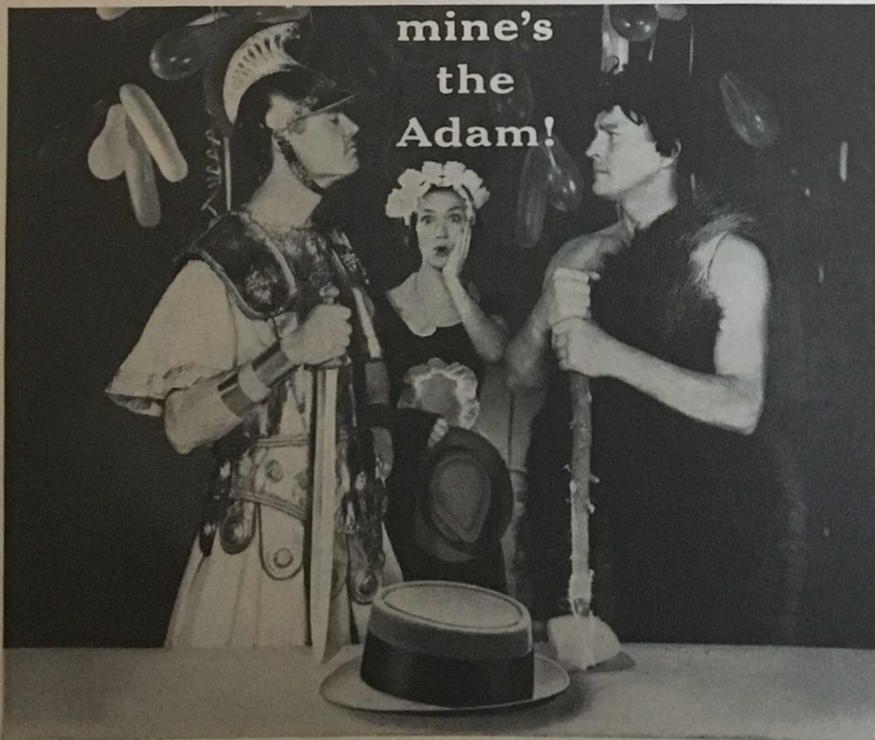
At the 1954 College All-Star training camp, Head Coach Jim Tatum called a conference of his assistants one boiling hot day. "We've got five kids from Notre Dame on that first team," he said. "Under Leahy last year they played like All Americans, but this heat has 'em dragging. We've got to do something to key them up."

Evashevski spoke up. "You'll have to have a heart attack, at least, Jim. These guys are used to the best."

To gauge properly Evashevski's success at Iowa, one must first understand how far their football fortunes had fallen. It was not a case of restoring a once-great football power to former brilliance; it was a matter of trying to transform a perennial, lackluster loser into a winner. Not only were the Hawkeyes the year-in and year-out doormat of the conference; they could barely lay claim to belonging in the Big 10.

Iowa could boast only one championship in 52 years of conference play—in 1921 under Howard Jones—and had tied for the title in 1900 and 1922. That about told the story. Except for a brief taste of glory in 1939, when Dr. Eddie Anderson led Nile Kinnick and the immortal

[Continued on page 30]



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[Continued from page 26]

"Ironmen" to a second place finish, the years between were as bleak as only continual defeat can be. In 30 years, the Hawkeyes had managed only four winning Big 10 seasons; they had finished higher than fifth only five times since 1922.

Hirings and firings were numerous in the Iowa athletic department. In the five years prior to Evashevski's arrival, the school had had a new athletic director and two complete changes of football and basketball coaches. Policy and personnel upheavals seemed to be almost a daily event. Alumni and fans were split apart by the departure of Eddie Anderson after the 1949 season. The breach grew wider with the appointment of Leonard Raffensperger, a high school coach for 18 years with no college head coaching experience, to succeed Anderson in 1950. In two years his teams won two Big 10 games, lost nine and tied one. Raffensperger was fired after the 1951 season, causing further dissension among the rank and file.

Such was the picture Evashevski entered in 1952. A losing team, a losing tradition, a divided and disinterested alumni, and a fall schedule that included seven Big 10 games, Notre Dame and Pittsburgh. It is doubtful if any coach at a major school ever faced a more hapless prospect.

It takes as much as \$100,000 a year to field a modern big-time college football team, counting scholarships, recruiting expenses and other financial aid. For the

most part, this money—as opposed to equipment, travel and other actual playing expenses—must come from voluntary contributions. And even with excellent backing, there is no certainty of success. The football graveyard is filled with coaches who could not survive the ruthless recruiting wars. Add to this the unpredictables of fan-support, scheduling, injuries, and press and alumni acceptance and you have some idea why coaches advise their sons to go into accounting.

Oddly enough, it was the very bleakness of the Iowa situation that attracted Evashevski to it. Challenges intrigue him; the tougher they are, the more eagerly he responds. His coaching career is a series of uphill climbs. At Hamilton College of New York, he won five of seven games his first year; he was in on the ground floor of the Michigan State rebuilding program during the late 1940's, which turned the Spartans into a national powerhouse; and in the two years before coming to Iowa he brought Washington State from a Pacific Coast Conference tail-ender to a title contender with a 7-3 record.

"When someone told me the Iowa job was impossible, that's when I decided to take it," Evashevski said at the time.

Take it he did, and with a vengeance. In his first 60 days on the campus he made 72 appearances, addressing alumni and civic groups across the state, quarterback clubs and booster organizations. His approach was hard hitting, sincere, concise. He alternately cajoled and whip-

lashed; he stepped on toes and pulled no punches. To one group of prominent alumni he said: "If you want winning football at Iowa, you're going to have to get behind us 100 percent. If you don't, you can all go to hell."

Iowans, traditionally conservative, were at first startled; but they liked this kind of honest, straight-forward talk. They rallied behind the new coach and, in the case of major alumni and fund-raising groups, forgot their differences. The strongest football support in Iowa history began to take form.

Recruiting was tackled with the same fervor. Evashevski's first windfall came in September of 1952 with the enrollment of the famed "Steubenville Trio"—Cal Jones, Frank Gilliam and Eddie Vincent. All three started their first game as sophomores in 1953, and were regulars from then on. Jones became the greatest lineman in Iowa history, making All America in 1954 and 1955; Vincent led the Big 10 in rushing in 1954, and Gilliam was with-out equal as a defensive end.

The three personified Evashevski's idea of what a football player should be. When Jones was a sophomore, Evashevski observed his line coach, Bob Flora, giving the rugged 225-pound Negro boy some special instruction one night in practice.

"Leave him alone, Bob, and let him make a great coach out of you," Evy said.

Jones himself was noted for his quips. After running over a freshman lineman in scrimmage on one of his bull-like charges, Jones looked down and said, "Man, don't just lie there. Start doing push-ups until the stretcher comes."

Recruiting is the heart and soul of successful college football. Few people outside the profession realize how intense the competition can become. One recruiter for another Big 10 school tells the story of how he tried to get a widely sought halfback. "Everybody was after the kid, but we needed him real bad. I thought I would try to do something special for him. I found out his family didn't have too much money, and their house needed a paint job. So, I made arrangements to have it painted for them. When I got there, I discovered our chief rival had already painted the house on the outside, and another school had re-decorated it on the inside."

Evashevski's particular problem was that Iowa, a small-population state by Big 10 standards, did not produce enough top flight football talent. He set up far flung contacts with former teammates in coaching, personal friends and alumni. Within the state, he made countless appearances at high school banquets, and worked steadily with "I" Club members to bring the best possible home-grown prospects to the university.

Promising youngsters soon began paying visits to the Iowa campus, and Evashevski, with an uncanny eye for spotting the special blend of "meanness and ability" that makes a good football player, was able to begin his rebuilding plans in earnest. Disappointments were many. He seldom got all the players he wanted, and often in the early days—because of Iowa's low prestige as a football school—had to

[Continued on page 32]



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[Continued from page 30]

be content with less than 50 percent of his goal. Three things helped offset the deficit: his ability to screen out the top candidates, get enough of them to form a nucleus, and bring out the best in the lesser talent on the squad.

"I would like nothing better than to field an all-Iowa club," Evashevski once remarked. "Our top kids compare with any in the country, and we've had some great ones, like Kenny Ploen, Jerry Reichow, Bill Fenton, Don Suchy, Jerry Hilgenberg, all of whom earned either All-Conference or All-America recognition. The trouble is there aren't enough of them. We have some 250 high schools playing 11-man football. Compare this to Texas, with 722, and Ohio, with more than 600. You can't win in the Big 10 without Big 10 material."

Of the 44 players on the 1956 Rose Bowl squad, 19 were native Iowans. Neighboring Illinois and Indiana supplied most of the rest, 18; but the bulk of these were from the Chicago-Gary area which every Big 10 school, along with Notre Dame, considers its own domain.

Iowa fans did not expect much in Evashevski's first year, 1952. After all, the team had failed to win a Big 10 game the year before, and only two first stringers were back. Nevertheless, Evashevski rankled at each defeat. The club lacked speed, depth and experience, and was playing a murderous schedule. He repeatedly said, "Whatever you do, don't blame the kids. They're trying as hard

as they can." Then added, with half-humor, "I don't have to coach. I've got a rich father-in-law."

After four straight losses, Evashevski rose to address a pep rally on the eve of the Homecoming game. "I got a telegram from my father-in-law today," he said slyly. "It reads: 'You better start winning. I don't have that much money.'" The next day Iowa scored the Big 10 upset of the year—an 8 to 0 victory over Ohio State which prevented the powerful Buckeyes from going to the Rose Bowl.

Evashevski is one of the most resourceful coaches in the business. He is continually experimenting, and will not hesitate to make bold and dramatic changes in his offense and defense to meet a given situation. In 1953, his spies noticed that Minnesota's great tailback, Paul Giel, had developed a few telegraphic habits: when he was going to run with the ball on his famous option play, he would fake a pass; when he was going to pass, he would start to run. Evashevski adjusted his defenses accordingly, putting on a savage rush whenever the Minnesota star would threaten a pass. The result: Giel made only 13 yards on the ground, the lowest of his career, and Iowa scored a 27-0 victory.

Similar stress on defense paved the way to Iowa's 1956 wins over Minnesota and Ohio State. After the Ohio State victory, Evashevski said, "We knew they had won 17 straight Big 10 games going up the

middle with the belly-series; so we decided to put everything right there and dare them to pass." With behemoths like Alex Karras, Dick Klein and Mac Lewis—who average around 260 between them—shoring up the center of the line, the Buckeyes did not get inside the Iowa 30 all afternoon, and their aerial game was never a threat.

Evashevski can always be counted on to do the unexpected, much to the dismay of opposing coaches. He is constantly springing trick plays, switching key men from one position to another to confuse the defense, and having halfbacks and fullbacks throw passes when they never have done so before. In 1954 Earl Smith led the nation in punt returns, and late in the season Iowa fans were concentrating most of their defensive efforts on him. Against Purdue, when the Boilermakers were in a kicking situation, Evashevski suddenly had the fleet Smith move from his normal safety position to linebacker, and played quarterback Jerry Reichow deep. The ball sailed straight to the rugged Reichow, but instead of running with it he simply stood in his tracks. The entire Purdue team swarmed toward him. Just as he was being tackled, he handed off to Smith who streaked 67 yards down the unguarded sidelines for a touchdown.

Evashevski refers to 1952 as his "gingerbread" season. "We didn't have much talent, but we had every play in the book." On one of them, against Pittsburgh, the team shifted from T to single wing; the snap went to the fullback, who executed a full spin, faked to the left half, went into the line and handed off to the quarterback. The quarterback dropped back, faked a pass with his right hand, and handed off in back of him to the right half, who ran about five yards then threw a left handed pass to the left half behind a screen on the right side of the line.

"If we'd only been able to fool Pittsburgh as well as we did the radio announcers, we'd have won the game," Evashevski said afterward.

Such razzle-dazzle is only a superficial part of Evashevski's system. Being a bone-breaking blocker and tackler himself, he lays his greatest stress on fundamentals. He will sacrifice speed and passing, if necessary, to achieve over-all consistency. "What good is a kid who can throw the ball 50 yards or run the hundred in 9.7 if he can't make a tackle on defense, and misses blocks?" Evashevski asks.

Like most coaches who stress the "basic" game, he looks for boys who like contact. Many a flashy high school quarterback or halfback has spent his freshman year at Iowa as defensive fodder on the hamburger squad, scrimmaging against the varsity. The sole purpose is to find out whether a boy wants to play football or, in the descriptive language of Line Coach Flora, is a "candy-ass."

One of the more direct tests Evashevski uses is called the "meat grinder." The selected squad member stands in a rectangular area, 5 feet wide and 10 feet long. He braces himself and prepares to fend off the charges of 10 or 12 of the best blockers on the team, coming at him

[Continued on page 129]

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[Continued from page 32]

at full speed, one after another, from all angles. The object is for the player to stay on his feet and in the box as long as he can. The resultant whacking, cracking and groaning is enough to make a grown man wince—and more than one aspiring young tackle has left the field groggy. "If a boy can get used to hard contact during the week, he'll be a lot more able to take the pounding he gets in the average Big 10 game," Evy explains.

This emphasis on body contact pays off. Iowa did not fumble during the last four games of the 1956 season, while in the crucial Minnesota game alone, their relentless defensive play forced six Gopher fumbles and three pass interceptions.

Evashevski is a keen judge of character and mental attitude. He knows when to give a boy a boost, or a kick in the pants. The most striking example of this is Alex Karras, Iowa's giant All-America tackle. He came to Iowa after a brilliant high school career, in which he made the Indiana All-State team three years at three different positions. He also arrived overweight and with an oversized opinion of himself. His sophomore year in 1955 was so disappointing he failed to win a letter. Evashevski wasted no time coddling him. He told him, in effect, to either play football or not bother to come out, adding that he was not counting on him in his 1956 plans. Karras' mental outlook did an abrupt switch; he trimmed off 20 pounds and reported for practice so eager that even the coaches were astounded. Possessed of tremendous reflexes and determination, he became the bulwark of an Iowa line that Athletic Director Moose Krause of Notre Dame called "the best I have seen in five years."

In the winter of 1956, Evashevski made the biggest decision of his coaching career. He felt he finally had enough of the right kind of material assembled to change his offense completely. He spent several weeks at Delaware University with Coach Dave Nelson, a close friend and former teammate at Michigan. Together, they worked on a new idea Nelson had developed the year before—a balanced line winged-T, with single wing blocking. Evashevski took it back to Iowa and added some wrinkles of his own. That spring, he secretly threw out his old system—a combination of single wing, T and split-T, run from the unbalanced line—and installed the new one. The idea was marvelously simple. It provided the power of the single wing, the quickness of the T, and above all, forced the defense to stay "honest." The wingback could be used as a blocker, pass receiver, or a ball carrier on reverses. In addition, it was a "mirrored" offense, meaning the blocking assignments and execution were the same for plays to either side of the line, greatly simplifying instruction and substitution. The key to the system was a great quarterback, and Evashevski knew he had one in Kenny Ploen.

D-Day came against Indiana, the first game of the 1956 season. Evashevski admits he spent many sleepless nights, worrying whether his new offense would actually work in a game. His fears were quickly allayed. The offense moved flawlessly. Iowa took command and rolled to a 27-0 victory.

To the average fan, Evashevski is a picture of composure during a football game. Sitting at the sideline, usually with one or two of his young sons on the bench with him, he watches the play with an expressionless face, talks occasionally on the spotter telephone, and sips continually at a glass of water. Every once in a while he will get up to confer with a player entering or leaving the game. Although he may be "tearing himself apart inside," as one assistant put it, he rarely shows any outward sign of it.

Ruth Evashevski, a warm, attractive woman who has the charm and freshness of a coed, forms an effective counter-balance for her husband's personality. The two met while Evashevski was at Michigan, and were married shortly after graduation. They have six children, five of them boys, ranging in age from 6 months to 14 years. The second youngest is Tom Harmon Evashevski, 4, named for Evy's Michigan running mate who still is one of his closest friends. The Evashevskis live in a large, comfortable, well appointed home in Iowa City, which serves as a gathering place for prominent alumni, visiting coaches and relatives. Before one recent Homecoming, a total of 17 people stayed in the house overnight, counting Evashevski's own family. "I had to come out to the game to get some peace and quiet," he muttered the next day.

During the off-season, Evashevski polishes his expert skills as a hunter and fisherman. He can discourse for hours on the glories of gun and rod, even at the expense of football. Several years ago, he produced a color film on muskie fishing which was shown by a number of TV stations. He is also an avid flyer, piloting his own plane on speaking appearances and other engagements around the mid-west; and, to the amazement of many, he has a flair for music. One of his chief sources of relaxation while in Iowa City is playing the electric organ he has in his home.

Evashevski's blunt, outspoken approach has stepped on many toes, and some critics have accused him of being too tough, too frank, too hard to get along with. A veteran Big 10 official recently reflected on this: "All the great ones—Bierman, Crisler, Leahy, Zuppke, Rockne—had a lot of the dictator in them. Big time coaching today is a rough, tough, vicious business. It takes a rare assortment of qualities to survive, and they are not the kind that make for pleasant social relationships. An athletic director has two choices in hiring a coach. If he wants a winner, he probably will have to take a lot of temperament in the bargain; if he wants a nice mild guy, he probably won't get a winner."

Forest Evashevski is, and will continue to be, a tough customer and a winner.

—Jim Zabel

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pigskin

Full grain pigskin that's buckskin-soft, wears like horsehide. Has dress-glove look, sure-fingered fit, a feel you've never felt before in hardy work gloves. Tough, pliable, economical. Full or reverse grain.

feel that tanned in softness

rockford, michigan