

Tom Harmon 1920-1990

By Mark Purcell

Tom Harmon, 70, died from a heart attack in Los Angeles March 15, 1990. The dutifully admiring obituaries which we have seen had problems recognizing his legendary status in American college football and indeed, to some extent, even recognizing how good a player he really was. So these few memorial comments.

In 1936 Michigan recruited Tom out of Gary, Indiana, where he had been a tremendous multi-sport star, the bluechip high school recruit of the season. His recruiting and 1938 sophomore eligibility instantly settled some 1934-37 won-loss problems Michigan had been having, the way Joe DiMaggio's purchase from the Coast League settled a few difficulties for the New York Yankees.

Harmon ran into a few political problems at Ann Arbor, however, by no means of his own causing. These were serious enough that in his freshman year there was a wireservice story about Tulane working at recruiting him off campus as a transfer player. Fritz Crisler, hired away from Princeton as the new head coach in 1938, brought with him from the East some transfer recruits of his own. One of these, a light running back who could not pass, Paul Kromer, was installed at tailback with big Tom at wingback as a semi-blocker, semi-backup tailback. Tom was not officially switched to tailback until sometime in his junior year.

As Harmon graduated from hotshot high school recruiting flash into the best player in the NCAA -- this occurred in 1939 -- he became the mutual target for intense media publicity (interviewing, etc.) on the one hand, and intense jealousy among at least some of his teammates on the other. Tom never was voted the 1940 senior captaincy he badly wanted. Crisler's decision to start him out as a blocking wingback may even have been partially a coach's decision to deal with the jealousy problem.

Since Harmon only won the Heisman in 1940, it's important to emphasize Tom was pretty well accepted as the premier college player his previous 1939 season. Harmon and Michigan routed Iowa and Heisman Trophy winner Nile Kinnick 27-7 in 1939. This was one of the most famous of all Hawkeye teams, but Harmon ran wild, accounting for every Michigan point on four TD's and three conversion kicks. One of Tom's scores was a 90-yard interception return.

Tom's best college team was unquestionably Michigan 1940 (7-1) which many contemporaries considered the unofficial national champion. Michigan lost a road game in terrible weather to eventual national champ Minnesota 7-6. Michigan in 1940 ran a sophisticated Crisler spinner single-wing attack which sent fullback and ball-handler Bob Westfall up the middle and Tom outside or off-tackle on reverses and pitches. The signal caller, blocker-linebacker, was Forest Evashevski, who became a national college "big name" simply as "Tom Harmon's blocker." Two backs on 1940 Michigan became successful college coaches, Evashevski and the wingback, Dave Nelson.

Enough of Tom's achievements survive in the annual statistics reports of the NCAA guides to give some idea of how good he was, but they are inadequate. This is because the old NCAA system rated team yards by per-game averages, the

modern system still in use, but player yards were listed only by totals and not the per-game averages. Harmon's conference, the Big 10, and the midwest majors in general, scheduled eight games a year, while Tom's statistical competitors elsewhere played 9-10-11 games. Furthermore, in his 1939-40 superstar years, 15 of 16 Michigan games were vs. true major foes; the only hapless breather was 1939 Chicago, and Tom's appearance here was strictly controlled by Crisler, who had once been Stagg's assistant Chicago.

In both these eight-game seasons, Harmon is listed in the guides as major college scoring leader (helped by his kicking the team's extra points) and total offense leader. In fact, by modern statistical rules, going by his per-game averages, Tom led the NCAA both years in rushing, all-purpose rushing, total offense, scoring and TDR's (touchdowns responsible from scrimmage rushing and passing). The modern NCAA equivalent to Tom's kind of prewar single-wing tailback would be a wishbone quarterback. Harmon, not Archie Griffin, should have been the first two-Heisman tinner and in a breeze. But the media got behind Kinnick (an excellent player) very early in 1939, and the official voter attitude was that two midseason losses to Illinois and Minnesota canceled Harmon's voter chances as a junior. Both losses occurred when Ev-ashevski had injury problems.

Most people are aware, even the 1990 obit writers, that Tom played a couple postwar years as an LA Ram halfback in the pro T. He was an excellent pass defense man and journeyman offensive runner, on legs damaged by five years of distinguished service as a wartime pilot. It's less well known Harmon was tailback for the 1941 Chicago all-stars vs. the '41 Chicago Bears, then and for some years accepted as the best all-time American football team. So the "real" Harmon did play one true game vs. the pros and at his true tailback position, on a team built around him. The All-Star coach, Carl Snavely, was fascinated by the then new free substitution rule and did what observers considered quite a bit of lineup juggling. But there was no question Harmon was the core player while in the game. Tom ran up his usual 100-plus yards vs. the Bears, just as if they were Michigan State or Penn. With the help of a touchdown pass by Tom's backup, Charley O'Rourke, the stars were down only 13-16 in the fourth quarter before the Bears finally exploded and put it away 37-13.

Historical adjustments made, the greatest college football player of all-time was anyone from Willie Heston and Jim Thorpe to O.J. Simpson and Company. Harmon's athletic director, Fielding Yost, thought Tom very comparable to Heston, and Yost saw them both play. There is a strong case to be made that Harmon was the greatest of them all. Ave atque vale.

After his brief whirl at pro football, playing on legs burned in combat and damaged after twice bailing out in rugged terrain, Harmon became a noted radio and television sportscaster. In his senior year at Michigan, 1940, Harmon earned the ultimate award in sports when he was named Male Athlete of the Year by the Associated Press.