Run Backward, on a Mission

Cornerback Norman Hayes's rituals include shutting down runs and passes.

NORMAN HAYES likes rituals. At Tucker High School in Tucker, Georgia, he ate the same dinner—chicken, green beans, mashed potatoes—before each football game. Then the town got quiet: nearly everyone was in the stadium before the team even arrived. Under “Friday night lights,” his Tigers (Hayes played quarterback) took up a prescribed formation in the end zone and made their ceremonial entrance onto the field. “Football in the south,” he says, “is unreal.” At Harvard, Hayes, the team’s captain, watches the 1996 sports comedy Space Jam, featuring Michael Jordan playing basketball with Looney Tunes cartoon characters, every Friday night before his Saturday games. “It calms my nerves,” the Eliot House senior says. “Reminds me that we’re just playing another game.”

The ritual observances have had positive results. Hayes’s high-school teams went 50-6 and won the state championship his sophomore year—and winning a state football title in Georgia is no cakewalk. In college, his three Crimson squads have posted a 26-4 mark and captured two Ivy titles, including an undefeated campaign in 2011.

Last fall, Hayes (now a defender who plays cornerback, nickel back, and safety) made the All-Ivy First Team. The star quarterback with a strong arm who runs well has come to love defense, and relishes a good hit. “Offense is structured. You play with composure and finesse,” he explains. “On defense you can be physical. It’s very liberating, taking out whatever aggression you have on the offensive guys. You impose your will. You might not touch the ball, but it feels great to stop somebody from doing what they want to do.”

As a Harvard sophomore, Hayes announced himself with a splash in the 2012 Brown game. The Bears’ huge, 225-pound running back Spiro Theodosi, who outweighed Hayes by 30 pounds, sprinted wide on an outside run. Hayes came over unblocked and leveled Theodosi at full throttle, taking him off his feet and sending his helmet flying. “The best part of Norman’s game is how he can tackle,” says defensive coordinator Scott Larkee. “He’s a natural—he does it exactly right. Every game he makes at least one spectacular, highlight-film stop.”

Last fall, Hayes sustained a severe ankle sprain against Penn, and didn’t practice in the week before the Yale game. “I assumed we didn’t have him for Yale,” says Larkee. “He could barely walk.” On the morning of the Game, Larkee saw Hayes “limping terribly, in real pain” in the hotel lobby. “But as soon as he noticed me, Norman stopped limping,” says Larkee, chuckling. On the field, Hayes declared, “No, I’m fine,” and gutted it out, not only playing about a third of the snaps, but breaking up a pass and forcing a fumble in Harvard’s 34-7 victory.

Hayes’s foot speed, quickness, reactions, and mobility impressed coaches who recruited him as a defensive back. Safeties and cornerbacks (including nickel backs, the “third” cornerbacks who at times join the defense, putting five men—hence “nickel”—in the secondary) are the fastest defensive players, as they need to stay with the fleet-footed wide receivers. In straight-line acceleration, wide receivers may be...
the fastest players on the field, but the secondary defenders are close, and excel at running backward and changing direction at full speed as they mimic the receivers’ zigzag routes.

Defenses ordinarily design their schemes to funnel running plays toward the linebackers, who, as a group, are the best tacklers. Cornerbacks make sure that running backs do not get outside of them, and try to push ball carriers inward. When a corner- back has too much success thwarting the run, offenses often try to draw him off the play by sending a wide receiver toward his sideline: does he take the bait, or still read the running play? Defenders play cat-and-mouse games of their own. “Sometimes we bait the quarterback to throw to a certain location by making it look like we are out of position,” Hayes explains. “You act like you’re covering a different zone, and leave a wide-open area to throw into. Then when he throws there, you go get it.”

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That can lead to pass interceptions or breakups. In his first start at cornerback, as a sophomore, Hayes had a nation-high five pass breakups against San Diego. When disrupting a pass, “You always want to secure the tackle with one hand, and with the other hand knock the ball away,” he says. Interceptions with runbacks rank among the game’s most exciting plays. They are superb opportunities to move the football, because the opponents’ offense, not defense, is on the field, and they are likely in a disorganized state—they were trying to complete a pass, not stop a ball carrier. In the meeting room, Harvard defenders like to joke about the razzle-dazzle plays they plan to make: “When I intercept the ball, you come up behind me and I’ll pitch it to you.”

In real life, the first rule of interception returns, Hayes explains, is for another defensive back to immediately block the intended receiver. “They are the closest to the ball, and, besides us, the fastest guys on the field, so they have the best chance of catching up with whoever made the pick.”

Hayes, a psychology concentrator, is also active off the field in the Omega Psi Phi fraternity, Harvard Men Against Rape, and the Porcellian Club. On the gridiron this fall, he’ll take the field with stalwarts like defensive end Zach Hodges ’15, last fall’s Ivy League Defensive Player of the Year. And in the secondary, his mission is clear. “Our job,” he says, “is to make sure that whatever happens in front of us, we’ll be there to save the day.” That, and a DVD of Space Jam, may be all that Hayes, and Harvard, need.

—CRAIG LAMBERT

“Cleat” Hands Off

Among many other accomplishments, John T. Bethell, this magazine’s editor from 1966 through 1994, covered a lot of Harvard football games. He began writing, beautifully, about the sport he loves, in the Harvard Alumni Bulletin of September 20, 1971, reporting on new coach Joe Restic’s first day of practice. That dispatch appeared above Bethell’s initials. But for the October 11 issue, he adopted “Cleat,” the nom de football used by an earlier editor, Bill Bentinck-Smith, who may have thought it up. Bethell says undergraduates had long confected the Bulletin’s football columns; lacking a suitable candidate, he assumed the task “temporarily.” Now, he is hanging up his cleats.

It has been a remarkable run. Readers have come to rely on the archetypal “Cleat” dispatch, full of the historical resonances and records—long thought invincible, only to be overcome—that make college athletics such vivid fun. Of late, “Cleat” has upped his game, filing weekly online reports, e-mailed to registered readers. “I think I’ve seen all but two or three home games over the past 43 seasons,” Bethell recalls. “Haven’t traveled to Ithaca since the early 1970s, and had to skip a few other road games.” But only last September, beginning what became his final season, “Cleat” was there when the Crimson opened their campaign at the University of San Diego. His final dispatch, “Over the Moon” (January-February, page 34), taking in a 34-7 win in The Game, concludes on this characteristic note:

Harvard’s seven-game winning streak eclipses what had been the longest streak in the H-Y series, a string of six shutouts posted by Yale from 1902 to 1907. How long will the current streak last? “Statistically, this is unsustainable,” said coach Murphy at his postgame news conference.

“Cleat” won’t do the telling. Happily, however, the magazine’s tradition of rich, nuanced football coverage continues, in the capable hands of Dick Friedman ’73, who spent two decades as an editor and writer at Sports Illustrated. One of his most enjoyable tasks was helping edit SI’s The College Football Book (2008), for which he could call on more than a half-century of watching Crimson football. Friedman saw his first Harvard game at the Stadium at age seven, in 1958. Harvard lost to Penn, 19-6. “I was too young to know it, of course,” he says, “but that first chilly plunge readied me for a lifetime of disappointments and triumphs.”

His forthcoming history of the golden age of Harvard football, Crimson Autumns: When Harvard Was Number One, chronicles the 1908-1915 teams coached by the brilliant, innovative Percy Duncan Haughton, A.B. 1899, who “would be thrilled by the brainy play of current coach Tim Murphy’s teams.” Look for Friedman’s dispatches, continuing the “Cleat” tradition, online after games and in print throughout the season.

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