

BROWN: Serious injury derailed star's plans

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about. I wouldn't change anything (that happened). Not too many people can say they were high school All-Americans."

Brown was 17 when his life was altered dramatically. The play was ordinary. He took the ball into a pile, someone jumped on top, and Brown's fifth vertebrae fractured.

"After I got hit, I saw four or five referees all blurry, going back and forth," Brown said. "I tried to reach for one of them but I missed. They told me to stay down until I came to and my mind was clear."

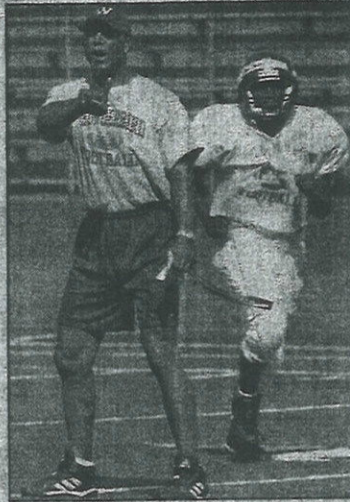
Nemec didn't know his star was hurt seriously. Brown walked to the sideline and felt unbalanced, as though a weight pulled him to the left.

A team doctor advised him to go to a hospital. Brown refused an ambulance ride. Harold Brown Sr. drove his son to the Cleveland Clinic, 45 minutes north of Kent.

"I made it over to the hospital and when the X-rays came out, my wife and I were standing and we almost passed out," Nemec said. "The doctor showed us the X-ray and how the vertebrae had turned. It was like I wanted to quit coaching. I never felt that way before. It was awful. It was our ignorance not knowing that he was hurt."

Doctors fused Brown's fourth, fifth and sixth vertebrae and screwed a halo into his head.

Even as he lay in bed, scholarship offers were being withdrawn. Brown wanted to go to Michigan and play for Bo



BRYAN OLLER, THE GAZETTE
Former high school All-American Harold Brown, now the football coach at Wasson, led the Thunderbirds to the Class 4A state playoffs this season.

Schembechler. But Schembechler called Brown at the hospital and said he could not let him play for the Wolverines.

"I think deep in Bo's heart, he didn't want anything to happen to me," Brown said. "It was kind of hard. I was bitter, like, 'Why me?'"

Brown had planned to visit Michigan, Penn State, Pittsburgh, Purdue, Texas and UCLA. All the schools withdrew scholarship offers.

"I didn't even get a 'Hi' from them," Brown said.

Ohio State coach Woody Hayes delivered more than a hello. He visited Brown in the hospital and offered him an athletic scholarship.

Brown redshirted his freshman season in 1978. Unfortunately for Brown, Hayes was fired after that season.

Earle Bruce replaced Hayes, reviewed Brown's medical situation and told the freshman he could no longer play football at Ohio State.

"I had to put a positive spin on it," Brown said.

He ran track and placed fifth in the long jump at the Big Ten indoor championships. He even tried out for the basketball team. But Brown wasn't what the coaches were looking for.

"That was frustrating to me," Brown said.

The frustration took a toll his sophomore year. His grades dropped and he ran into eligibility problems.

"The university asked me to leave," Brown said.

In 1980, Brown moved to Colorado Springs. Karla, one of his five sisters, helped him get a job at the Air Force Academy. A year away from football allowed Brown to clear his mind.

He tried football again at Joliet (Ill.) Junior College and succeeded, setting the NJCAA single-season rushing record in 1981 with 2,274 yards on 298 carries. (Rodrick Johnson of Dixie State College in Utah broke the record in 1996.)

In 1982, Brown spent his final collegiate year at Iowa State, splitting carries with another back.

Brown was named Big Eight Player of the Week for gaining 241 yards against Kent State. The yardage ranks No. 8 on Iowa State's single-game rushing list.

Brown never gave up his dream of playing professionally. Although he was drafted in

1983 by the USFL's Michigan Panthers, Brown signed as a free agent with the Washington Redskins.

He was released after two preseason games. At the time, Brown didn't know why.

One very likely reason was that the Redskins were coming off a Super Bowl victory and had running backs John Riggins, Joe Washington and Wilbur Jackson on the roster.

Another likely reason was the potential for further injury to Brown's neck and the ensuing liability.

"I was told by a friend of mine with the NFL that they couldn't keep him because of the liability issue," Nemec said. "He said Harold was absolutely good enough, but they were afraid to pick him up."

According to Brown, that friend was John Mackovic, Kansas City's coach from 1983 to 1986.

Brown tried to rejoin the Michigan Panthers, but he said a team doctor told him the team could not take the risk. Larry Coyer, now the Denver Broncos defensive coordinator, was the Panthers linebackers coach, but he was the defensive coordinator at Iowa State when Brown played for the Cyclones.

"He said the only reason I wasn't given a chance was because of my neck injury," Brown said. "That put my mind at ease — it wasn't because of my athletic ability."

Brown still received a \$35,000 signing bonus. His first check was for \$15,000.

"I bought stuff for my parents," Brown said. "I replaced

several of the lamps I broke when I was little, running around the house."

Later, Brown returned to Colorado Springs. In 1988 he was working out at the Olympic Training Center. That's where he met his wife, Maureen, who was on the Olympic handball team.

"I walk into the gym and I see this lady in a USA sweat suit," Brown said, his smile stretching with each word. "I asked if she played softball. I figured if I got her number to put her on the softball team, I could go from there."

They were married in 1993 and had two sons and a daughter.

Brown finished college at Southern Colorado (now CSU-Pueblo) and earned his teaching certificate in 1996.

"I think (Maureen's) the motivating force behind Harold," Nemec said.

Bob Alford, who hired teachers at District 11, brought Brown to Wasson four years ago. Alford was Brown's social studies teacher at Kent Roosevelt and has watched Brown bring the Wasson program to prominence.

"When he was a youngster," Alford said, "I would see him running down the street, dodging, stepping off the curb, back onto the curb, spinning around a tree, stepping over a little crack spot with his feet, little things like that, and people would say, 'Whoa.' And when he got older, that's what it was."

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Shattered dream

Injury limited Wasson coach's chances for pro football career

By NICK WALTER
THE GAZETTE

Harold Brown's innate abilities as a running back were never an issue.

Not as a child on Dodge Street in Kent, Ohio, where he and the other kids ran relay races around the block. And certainly not at Kent Roosevelt High School, where the 6-foot-3, 195-pound Brown set himself apart from any running back in the area.

"If you remember how O.J. Simpson ran, picture a bigger O.J.," said Brown's high school coach, John Nemecek. "I was head coach 27 years out here. I had about 30 Division I football players and he's absolutely the finest athlete I've ever been around. He would have been a pro football player."



BRYAN OLLER, THE GAZETTE

Despite playing comparisons to O.J. Simpson, Wasson coach Harold Brown never played an NFL regular-season game. A neck injury in high school made teams hesitant to keep Brown on the roster.

Brown will be on the sideline coaching Wasson High School at 7 tonight when the Thunderbirds play Monarch at Centaurus High School in Lafayette in the first round of the Class 4A state playoffs. Wasson is 8-2 and Monarch is 9-1.

Early in the 1977 football season, every coach in the Big Ten Conference and many other national powers wanted Brown.

One play changed all that.

In the sixth game of his senior season, Brown

charged under a pile of bodies and broke his neck. He missed the rest of the season.

Brown still was named to the Parade Magazine All-American team alongside Marcus Allen, who is a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

But Brown never played in an NFL regular-season game.

"Like the old saying, I'm loving life and life is loving me," Brown said the other day while wearing a Buffalo Bills O.J. Simpson jersey and supervising a game of kick ball during physical education. "The people here, they know what I'm

Avalanche 5, Early blitz does

Colorado hands
1st home loss o

THE ASSOCIATED

VANCOUVER, British Colum
Avalanche scored four time
utes on its way to a 5-3 vic
to the Vancouver Canu
record Thursday night.

Ian Laperriere, Joe Sak
Marek Svatos and An
Laaksonen scored first-pe
od goals for Colorado, whi
has won six of its past seve
games, including thre
against Vancouver.

Karlis Skrastins added
short-handed goal for the A
alanche, which moved tw
points behind the Northwe
Division-leading Canucks de
spite playing two fewer
games.

Ed Jovanovski, Todd Ber
tuzzi and Richard Par
scored for the Canucks, wh
lost for the first time in e
They have dropped five o
games.

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THE ASSOCIATED PRI

Barnett h Buffaloes earn Nort

Parade's American High School Football Team

Ex-Rider back sets junior college record

Harold Brown, former Kent Roosevelt All-Metropolitan League running back, has established an all-time junior college rushing mark in one year at Joliet (Ill.) Junior College.



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Sports

wn's dream has become a night