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As tough as they come

Former STC, Iowa standout Jon Lazar to be inducted into IHSAA Hall of Fame

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Jon Lazar always believed in himself, and that confidence carried a small town kid from Tama to the gridirons of the Big 10 and even onto two NFL practice squads. Now, the bruising former running back and fullback is adding another accolade to the list — more than 45 years after he graduated from South Tama County High School in 1975, he'll be inducted into the Iowa High School Athletic Association (IHSAA) Hall of Fame at halftime of the Class 5A state championship game in Cedar Falls on Friday night.

The success he had on the field means a lot to Lazar, who now calls Raleigh, N.C. home, but he's equally proud of the friendships he's built with everyone from old high school teammates who plan to attend the ceremony Friday to legendary NFL coach Dick Vermeil, who still has fond memories of Lazar from his brief stint on the Philadelphia Eagles practice squad in the early 1980s.

A football family

The son of a decorated WWII gunner pilot, Lazar was born in Marshalltown and spent his entire youth in Tama, where he observed the local school's strong football tradition and had a desire to someday play a part in carrying it forward. The sport was popular in the family: one of Lazar's cousins was an all-state quarterback in Lockport, Ill., and played for the father of former Minnesota Vikings coach Mike Zimmer.

Another cousin from Lockport ended up at the University of Illinois, and Lazar's own father had played at Northwestern University, another Big 10 school. His uncle played basketball for the Illini, and his mother's cousin was an All-American quarterback at Illinois.

Randy Boles, who was a year older than Lazar, remembers meeting him in elementary school and playing touch football at recess. Within a year or two, he had established his dominance.

"He told me, he said 'My goal one day is to play in the NFL,' and he made it. And that was because Jon Lazar was very committed, very dedicated and a caring person," Boles said. "Sometimes people thought he kind of had an arrogance, I guess, because of his athletic ability, but sometimes in order to be a leader, he had to. He wanted to get the best out of people, and he expected the best out of himself."

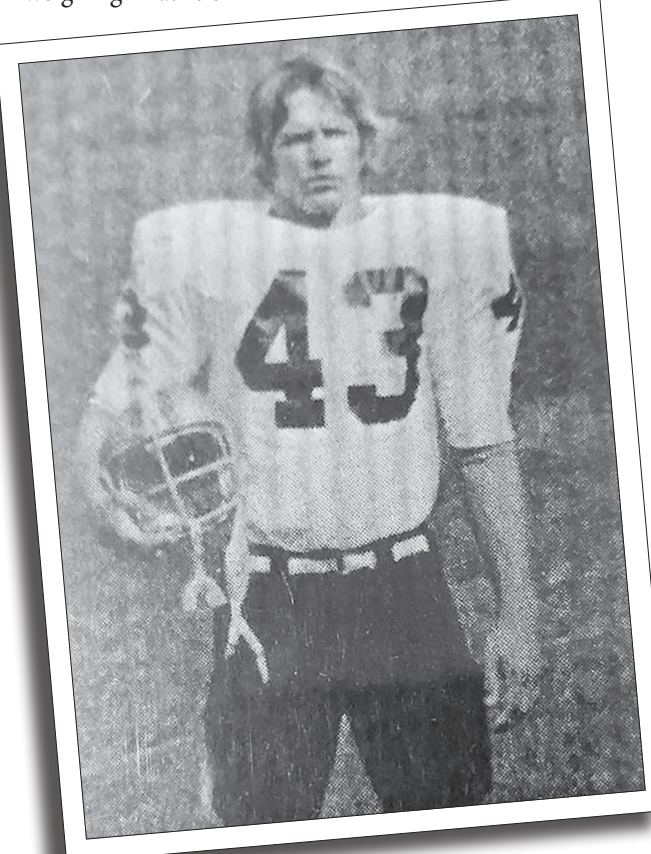
By the time he reached

high school, Lazar knew that he had "a really good group of guys" at South Tama, and he was bumped up to the varsity squad at defensive back during his sophomore campaign, already standing 6-foot-1 and weighing in at 190

of the best times of my life."

Taking it to the next level

Lazar was an all-state selection his last two years of high school, and his senior campaign of 1974 still sticks with him all these years



pounds. "I was always put on (the opponent's) best receiver, even as a sophomore, so I had to always prove myself," he said. "I had juniors and seniors that were riding me up and down all the time, and it wasn't a pleasant experience for the fact that nobody told me about that. I thought you were gonna be on a team and everybody loves you and you're gonna have a great time, but I experienced the total opposite of a welcome mat. They didn't want me there."

Despite the initial hard feelings over an underclassman jumping in front of older players (STC was coming off of its only perfect season in school history in 1971), Lazar's ability on the football field was impossible to deny from the get-go. By his junior year, he was already considered a team leader and continued to pulverize defenses from the running back position.

Aside from his relatives who had excelled at the sport before him, Lazar also found a guiding star in running back Mark Fetter, who also went on to play at Iowa and also earned all-state honors twice at STC.

"Mark Fetter and John were both probably as successful as each other, but they are very different styles. Mark was 'Hey, I'll run over you.' John would run over you, but you couldn't get a handle on him. He was all over the place," said Dana Schreck, who graduated the same year as Lazar and played quarterback on that South Tama team. "But it was really, really fun playing with him, and I will never, never forget the experience, that's for sure. It was some

later. The Trojans lost two games that season, both by a single point.

One was a 13-12 season opener against Urbandale, which had a roster over three times the size of STC, and Lazar finished with 31 carries, 285 yards and two touchdowns. The other also ended in a 13-12 score against Indianola.

"That was a tough pill to swallow, but if you think about it, we were so close to having a great season by two points," he said.

Boles compared South Tama to the basketball team from the classic sports drama "Hoosiers," but nevertheless, they went into matchups with bigger schools expecting to win. The Trojans utilized a balanced offensive attack under the guidance of Lazar and Schreck, and thanks to the attention Fetter had received a few years before, the Iowa coaching staff was already well acquainted with STC. The offers started to pour in from schools across the country, but Lazar knew where he wanted to end up.

"My whole thought process was really (that) there's no reason I need to leave the state, and I have too many people I know that are either Hawkeye fans or Iowa State fans," he said.

Schreck commented that Lazar was always quick to shout out his teammates, especially his offensive line, but it was hard to deny how special he was. After all, he did manage to finish his three-year high school career with over 3,700 yards rushing and 46 touchdowns and was named the MVP of the Shrine Bowl in 1975.

"He had an ability to

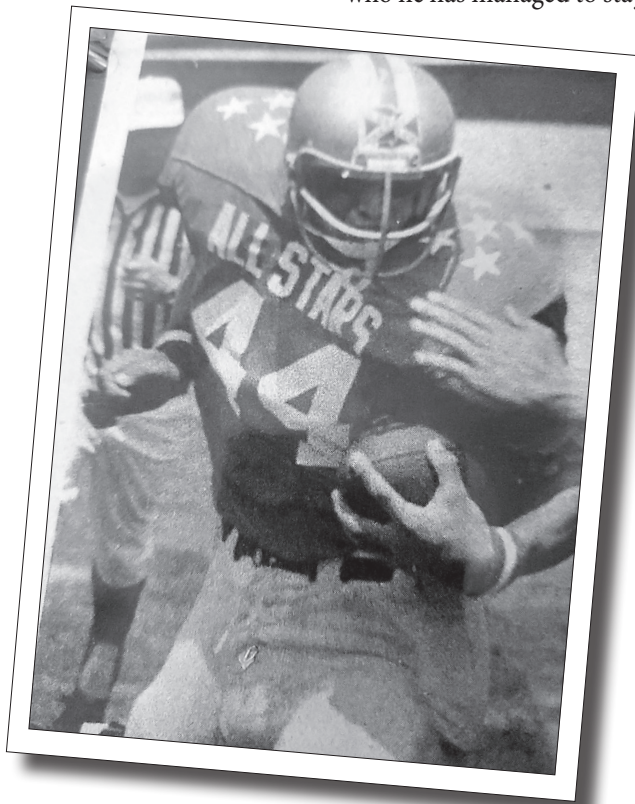
make something out of nothing. He'd slide over a couple holes or modify the change, or you could see him change how he lined up. I just knew he was surveying the defense to modify how he was gonna go at it," Schreck said. "I would say the biggest thing about John is the ability to adapt and pass the credit on to other people."

The team became a tight-knit unit, and Schreck described Lazar as "the character of the locker room" who always knew how to keep things light.

"Everybody enjoyed being around him. Everybody looked up to him, that's for sure," Schreck said.

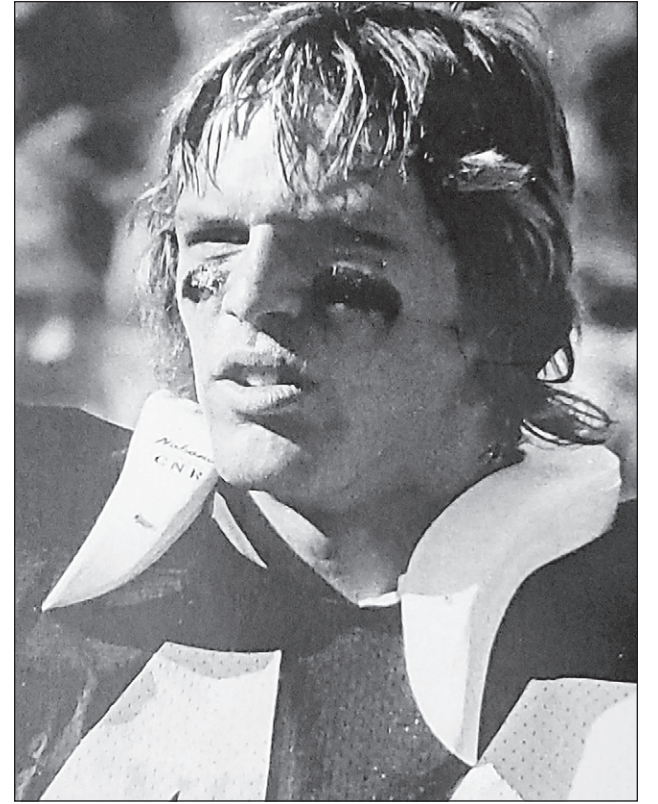
As fellow teammate Jay Hoskey, who went on to a successful coaching career at his alma mater, put it, Lazar was simply "bigger, faster and more competitive" than everyone else, but, Boles added, he never shied away from a challenge or thought he was better than his teammates.

"That's exactly how he was," Boles said. "I know that he would be the type that if someone fell down or something and you had to get this done, Jon would probably be the first one to turn around, run back, grab him and help him cross the finish line. I have no doubt. It's just the way he was wired."



Playing under coach Bob Commings, Lazar suffered an injury that nearly ended his career as a freshman at Iowa, but as he often did, he fought his way back, returning bigger and stronger and working his way onto the roster as a fullback by the time he was a sophomore.

From there, Lazar started the next three years — between he and Fetter, STC alums held down the fullback position for the Hawkeyes for six straight seasons — and although the Hawkeyes struggled during the Commings era (Hayden Fry would arrive on campus in 1979, the year



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

Lazar left), he still has fond memories of matching up against All-Americans like Clay Matthews Jr. of USC and Tom Cousineau of Ohio State.

"Joe Paterno said that the Iowa fullback beat up the Penn State linebackers, and that doesn't happen very often," Lazar said.

In a game against Wisconsin, Lazar and Fetter were lined up in the same backfield, and the moment still resonates with fans of Iowa high school football and especially STC — two all-state and All-America honorees from the same community suiting up together on one of the sport's biggest stages.

Life after football

Injuries had plagued Lazar before, but he wasn't about to give up on his dream of making it to the NFL. He signed a contract with the Dallas Cowboys and survived rookie and fall camps, but when doctors saw calcium deposits in his leg, the team's leadership decided to let him go. Lazar said he argued with Tom Landry for an hour, but to no avail.

A few weeks later, the Eagles came calling, and Lazar was dressing next to legendary quarterback and current ESPN analyst Ron Jaworski. He quickly became close with Vermeil, who he has managed to stay

pickup basketball when he felt a rip in his groin, and he knew he'd reached the end of the line even after the team asked him to come in for a workout.

"I said 'I can't run.' I'm not even gonna waste your ticket," Lazar said.

Never one to wallow, Lazar became a successful businessman and got involved in selling office equipment and then wide format hardware: blueprint machines, essentially.

"More than anything with Jon, he believed in himself. He wasn't gonna be denied as far as his athletic success, and he carried that into the business world," Hoskey said.

Despite all of the changes in the game over the years — most notably for Lazar, perhaps, is that the fullback position has all but disappeared — he still considers himself an avid football fan and loves to watch the Hawkeyes. And no matter where he's ended up (Lazar spent much of his adult life in the Twin Cities before moving to North Carolina), he never forgot where he came from.

"He was proud to be a Tama boy and proud of his friendships there, and I know he still keeps in touch with quite a few of them even though he's been out in North Carolina," Hoskey said.

While he will be the oldest of the honorees at this year's ceremony — fellow former Hawkeye standouts Pat Angerer and James Vandenberg among them — Lazar is more than happy to return to Iowa and receive such a special recognition about 40 miles up the road from where he played his high school ball.

Hoskey, who now serves as an assistant coach at Dowling Catholic in West Des Moines after a successful tenure leading his alma mater, played a key role in pushing for Lazar's induction, and he, Schreck and Boles, who is flying in from Arizona, are all planning to be in attendance.

"The first thing when they called me and said 'We're inducting you into the Hall of Fame,' blah blah blah, that whole thing, well, the first thing I thought was 'Man, I got a lot of people behind me,'" Lazar said. "This is an honor that really goes to many of my teammates that I played football with at South Tama because those guys, they made me. They made me who I am. Yes, I had some talent and I was fast and I was big and I was strong, but you can't run through a hole unless there's a hole there."

Lazar plans to donate his Hall of Fame plaque to South Tama, where it can sit next to Fetter's and hopefully inspire the next great Trojan football star.