

A unique Senior Day awaits the Morris family



Iowa linebacker James Morris (#44) helps teammates carry the Cy-Hawk Trophy following the Hawkeyes' 27-21 win over Iowa State on Sept. 14, 2013. Morris will be one of 15 senior players recognized during Iowa's Senior Day ceremony prior to the Hawkeyes' game against Michigan on Saturday, Nov. 23, 2013, at Kinnick Stadium.

By Brendan Stiles

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The date: Nov. 23, 2013. The time: 10:45 a.m. Central. This particular moment is one Greg Morris has spent more time preparing himself for than even he initially envisioned.

Typically, Senior Day is like any other day at work for the Iowa football equipment manager. He may have had occasional opportunities to witness the pregame ceremony and watch players he developed special bonds with get recognized by fans

and greeted on the field of Kinnick Stadium by family members. But if there was ever a task that required his assistance on those fall Saturdays, it would be just like any other game day where work needed to get done.

Morris' association with the Hawkeye program spans 35 years between being a student at the UI, a volunteer who worked during home games and then ultimately being hired full-time in 1988. Saturday will mark the 35th Senior Day Morris has witnessed at Iowa. Except this one will be uniquely different.

This Senior Day, the pregame ceremony trumps everything else happening around him. Because sometime during this 15-minute ceremony leading up to Iowa's game against Michigan, one of those 15 Hawkeye players being recognized will be Greg's son, senior linebacker and team captain James Morris.

"It's hard to believe," Greg said. "Four years ago last September, he started on special teams. You fast forward to right now, and he's three games away from ending his college career."

The passion and the process

James was in fifth grade when the two first met (Greg married James' biological mother, Lynn, in 2003; both James and his younger brother Jake have since fully embraced Greg as their father). Growing up in the nearby Iowa town of Solon, James and Jake would both join Greg down at the Hayden Fry Football Complex whenever they didn't have school. Greg said the two boys would help him with chores like recycling cardboard boxes whenever Nike shipments arrived.

James said he began playing organized football in sixth grade – not because he was influenced to play by Greg, but because he was simply a kid looking to have fun. As he got older, his passion for the game reached a point to where he became focused on making it "an area of expertise."

"It was probably more so his influence on me as a person and less about football," James said. "I think kids are going to gravitate towards what they're exposed to, but your interests are your interests. It wasn't necessarily that my dad forced me to play football or I loved football because my dad worked around football.

"I think that I was exposed to it, I enjoyed it and it was something that I was passionate about. He, along with my mom, were just always very supportive of me."

It was at Solon High School where James first made a name for himself on the gridiron. He was part of a team that won the 2007 Class 2A State Championship his sophomore year. Around that same time, a Division-I scholarship offer came from his dad's boss, Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz.

James committed to Iowa, went on to win two more state titles at Solon and then signed his national letter of intent with the Hawkeyes in 2010. As he reflected back on James' recruitment, Greg said there was a 'Wow' factor with James receiving the Iowa offer as a sophomore and that it was a different process given James' familiarity with faces inside the program.

"As each day has gone on, I think you realize how special that time was and how appreciative both Lynn and I, and I'm sure James is, of the opportunity that Kirk and his staff presented him at a young age," Greg said. "For him to fulfill that dream and fulfill that scholarship to the best of his ability is even more special."

A surreal start

From a physical standpoint, this was a major transition period for James, one he described as "comparing apples to oranges" as far as going from playing Class 2A football in Iowa to playing collegiately in the Big Ten. It was the mental transition James was making that left Greg at ease.

With Mondays being the players' day away from football, Greg said one of the first commitments James made in college was dedicating Mondays to taking as many classes and getting as much done academically as he possibly could. Greg attributes some of that work ethic, that mindset James possesses, to what he said was instilled in him at Solon by James' high school coach, Kevin Miller, as well as the rest of his coaching staff.

"When he got here, the football grind, he was fully aware of," Greg said. "The grind they go through in Solon is a lot like the grind here. Film study, daily commitments, stuff like that.

"That part, I think, wasn't as big a deal for him. But I think you realize – and he had to because he had to go through it – that it's long."

The date was Sept. 4, 2010. Iowa played Eastern Illinois in its first game since beating Georgia Tech in the Orange Bowl just eight months earlier. It also turned out to be James' first game as a Hawkeye, as he suited up and not only played on special teams, but even garnered some reps late in the second half with the back-up defense.

One month later, Iowa opened Big Ten play against Penn State in a prime time game played at Kinnick Stadium. Injuries decimated the Hawkeyes' linebacking corps to the point Ferentz decided James was the "next man in" and put the true freshman out there with his first defensive unit.

For those first moments James saw the field as a freshman, there stood Greg on the Iowa sidelines, left in awe by how fast everything was already unfolding.

"I'd be lying to you if I said you don't watch," Greg said. "Football is such a tough, sometimes violent, sport that you want him to stay healthy. So you do catch yourself watching him.

“Surreal? Yeah.”

Developing into a leader

Since that October evening in 2010 when Iowa played Penn State, James has been a staple of the Hawkeye defense. He started the final six games of his freshman season at middle linebacker – including Iowa’s 27-24 win over Missouri in the 2010 Insight Bowl – and ended up fourth on the team in tackles.

Over the course of his sophomore and junior years, James accumulated 223 tackles while starting all but two games for the Hawkeyes, both of which were the result of injuries. He was named one of Iowa’s team captains when the 2012 season began and still presently holds that distinction today.

But for everything James had previously accomplished on the field before this 2013 campaign started, right now has been his best football as a Hawkeye. Following wins over both Minnesota and Northwestern, James was named the Big Ten’s Defensive Player of the Week, becoming the first Hawkeye since 2004 to receive that honor twice in one season. Entering Saturday’s game against Michigan, the 6-2, 240-pound linebacker is currently second on the team with 81 tackles. He also possesses five sacks and three interceptions, both of which are team-highs.

James’ work ethic has also enabled him to thrive in the classroom. The political science and pre-law major currently possesses a 3.84 cumulative GPA and has already been named Academic all-Big Ten each of the past two years. Just in the last month, he was named one of nine semifinalists for the [Lott IMPACT Trophy](#), as well as one of 12 finalists for the [Wuerffel Trophy](#). On Dec. 10, James will be in New York City as one of 16 recipients of the National Football Foundation’s [National Scholar-Athlete Award](#), an \$18,000 post-graduate scholarship.

"I can't think of many guys better than James that have come through here," Ferentz said. "Just everything he does, he does it in a first-class way. He's just a tremendous student."

One of James' teammates also being honored on Senior Day is free safety Tanner Miller. In fact, he's the last player to precede James during the Senior Day ceremony when they're all being introduced. Like many other past and present Hawkeyes, Miller has developed a bond himself with Greg over the past four years. Seeing the amount of work both Greg and James put into what they do around the football complex, he said the similarities between the two are quickly noticeable.

"James definitely has some Greg in him," Miller said. "They're both very detail-oriented. They're always getting things done on time and are always sticklers about that kind of thing, which is what you want."

Inside the football complex, both James and Greg are very business-like. James' mindset is becoming the best football player he can be. Greg's mindset is making sure every Hawkeye player has his equipment needs met. But they also get some opportunities when they're both there to share a few father-son moments, which James described as "a luxury."

"He's not the type of guy where if you play a great game or you win an award, that doesn't make him any more proud," James said. "I think that he's probably more worried about the type of person I am and the way I treat people and how I handle myself."

"I just enjoy the time that I have with him."

From Greg's perspective, the last four years have gone fast. But they've been every bit as memorable as he hoped they would be when James first began his Hawkeye journey.

"The biggest joy that I've taken from this is that I get to be around him more," Greg said. "A lot of dads don't get that

chance when their kids are going through college. That's the joy you get. The, 'Hi, how are you?' or 'How's school going?' or when he calls me and wants to go to lunch knowing that I'll buy.

"I'm so blessed and very lucky that Kirk and his staff offered him a scholarship and he was able to be around here for the past four years because it has been a ball."

Senior Day

The date: Nov. 23, 2013. The time: 10:45 a.m. Central. This particular moment – 15 minutes before kickoff – is when the Senior Day ceremony begins. For Greg and his wife Lynn, this is when the emotions will start to kick in as they await James running out of the Kinnick Stadium tunnel to a boisterous ovation from the Hawkeye faithful.

"I think it will be full of joy," Greg said, as he attempted to envision what that moment will be like. "I'll be full of joy knowing that as each step he has evolved, he has accomplished the things he has wanted to do. He has worked hard for it.

"I'll have a great satisfaction on Saturday when his name is called, knowing that the hard work, his discipline, some of his odd, quirky things that he has chosen to do, have all paid off."

On the field, it remains to be seen what direction James' life takes him. Attending law school is very much a part of his future plans, regardless of how much football he ends up playing beyond Iowa's bowl game this winter.

No matter what happens though, James and Greg Morris will always have their father-son relationship – a relationship that will feature a very unique, yet very special moment Saturday morning inside Kinnick Stadium.

“Not many people have the opportunity to see their parents every day in college, whether they want to or they don’t,” James said. “It’s something I’ve enjoyed and I’ll miss it when it’s gone.”