**Everybody's All-America**
**By Ron Flatter**
Special to ESPN.com


*"When you could have a hometown boy like that, had that grit, that determination, straight A student, all-around good person, good values, it gave you a lot of pride. All of that holds a lot of sway over the imagination in the minds of people like me from the state of Iowa,"* **says Sen. Tom Harkin about Nile Kinnick, the 1939 Heisman Trophy winner.**

He's the son every mother wanted to have, the boy every father wanted his daughter to marry. He was also the man whose fate was the envy of no one.

Nile Kinnick is someone who reminds us how overused the word "hero" is in sport, since he is one of the few who actually fits the description. He was a Heisman Trophy winner, Phi Beta Kappa student and a man of letters who chose not to parlay his varsity block into a professional football career. Yet even with all these accomplishments, Kinnick's life tends to be paraphrased more by the way he died.

Kinnick became one of 407,000 Americans who lost their lives in military service during World War II. Less than four years after he accepted the 1939 Heisman by saying, "I thank God I was warring on the gridirons of the Midwest and not on the battlefeilds of Europe," Kinnick was killed in a training flight in the Caribbean waters near South America.

Such is the legacy of Kinnick that his likeness is on the face of the coin tossed at the start of every Big 10 football game.

He was born on July 9, 1918, in Adel, Iowa, the grandson of a governor. He was a star athlete in football and basketball at Adel High School for three years before the family moved to Omaha, Neb., after his junior year.

Kinnick grew to be 5-8 and 170 pounds. He never was very imposing, nor was he a particularly quick athlete. But he made the most of what he had.

After failing a football tryout with Minnesota, Kinnick went to Iowa, later saying the campus "is almost like home to me." His shifty running style helped earn him the nickname "The Cornbelt Comet." But his play didn't help Iowa win in his first two seasons: The Hawkeyes went 1-7 when Kinnick was all-Big Ten as a sophomore in 1937 and 1-6-1 in 1938 when Kinnick was slowed to a near halt by an ankle injury suffered in the opening game.

In 1939, Irl Tubbs was out as coach, Eddie Anderson was in, and the path was cleared for Kinnick's senior season. Like many of his teammates, Kinnick seldom left the field. So prevalent were 60-minute men on the undermanned Hawkeyes that the team was nicknamed "The Ironmen."

Kinnick was on the field an average of 57 minutes per game. He played 402 consecutive minutes against Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Purdue, Notre Dame, Minnesota and Northwestern before a separated shoulder in the season-finale against the Wildcats forced him to the sideline.

In the season-opening 41-0 romp over South Dakota, Kinnick ran for three touchdowns and dropkicked five extra points. The next game, with Iowa trailing by three points, his fourth-quarter touchdown pass gave the Hawkeyes a 32-29 victory over Indiana.

Against No. 2 Notre Dame, Kinnick scored Iowa's touchdown and kicked the decisive extra point in a 7-6 upset. A week later, his seven completions accounted for 157 yards and two fourth-quarter touchdowns in a stunning victory over perennial power Minnesota. This prompted one Chicago newspaper to print the headline, "Kinnick 13, Minnesota 9."

A victory over Northwestern would have given Iowa the Big Ten championship, but Kinnick was injured in the third quarter and the Hawkeyes struggled to a 7-7 tie, dropping them to a 4-1-1 second-place finish behind Ohio State. With an overall record of 6-1-1, Iowa was ranked No. 9 in the Associated Press poll.

A halfback who was the team's main passer, Kinnick threw for 638 yards and 11 touchdowns as well as rushing for 374 yards on 106 carries (3.5-yard average). He also made 11-of-17 dropkick conversion attempts and scored 41 points. By passing, running or kicking, Kinnick was directly involved in 107 of Iowa's 130 points that season. He also made eight interceptions.

He finished his career with 1,674 yards rushing, 18 interceptions (an Iowa record that lasted half a century) and an average of 39.9 yards per punt.

The Chicago Tribune's version of the Big Ten MVP award preceded Kinnick's winning the Walter Camp and Maxwell awards, further validating the prevailing opinion he was the nation's best football player. On Dec, 6, 1939, his acceptance of the Heisman Trophy became a seminal moment - both in athletics and in oratory.

Kinnick opened by saying, "It seems to me that everyone is letting their superlatives run away with them this evening, but I want you to know that I am mighty, mighty happy to accept this trophy."

Standing in front of patriotic bunting and wearing a broad shouldered, double-breasted, pinstriped suit that was fashionable at the time, Kinnick closed with a thought that mirrored the uneasy anticipation of American involvement in a war that was still an ocean away.

"If you'll permit me," he said, "I'd like to make a comment which, in my mind, is indicative perhaps of the greater significance of football and sports emphasis in general in this country. And that is I thank God I was warring on the gridirons of the Midwest and not on the battlefields of Europe. I can speak confidently and positively that the players of this country would much more, much rather struggle and fight to win the Heisman award than the Croix de Guerre."

After hearing the speech, Bill Cunningham wrote in The Boston Globe, "The country is OK as long as it produces Nile Kinnicks. The football part is incidental."

Kinnick's celebrity became so strong, he was named 1939's top male athlete in the country by the Associated Press. The honor was particularly noteworthy considering his competition included Joe DiMaggio, Joe Louis and Byron Nelson.

With a 3.4 grade-point average and the senior-class presidency on his résumé, Kinnick passed on a possible career in the National Football League, turning down a $10,000 offer from the Brooklyn Dodgers. Instead, he chose law school at Iowa.

In August 1941, Kinnick decided war was imminent and joined the Naval Air Corps Reserve. While waiting to be called to active duty, he was an assistant coach for Iowa that fall. On December 4, three days before Pearl Harbor, he reported for duty.

"There is no reason in the world why we shouldn't fight for the preservation of a chance to live freely," he later wrote in a letter home. "No reason why we shouldn't suffer to uphold that which we want to endure. May God give me the courage to do my duty and not falter."

On June 2, 1943, Kinnick was flying a training mission from the U.S.S. Lexington off the coast of Venezuela when he experienced engine problems. Rather than try a dangerous landing on the Lexington and endangering personnel, he attempted an emergency landing into the Caribbean.

Although a boat arrived on the scene within eight minutes, and rescue parties searched for several hours, Kinnick's body was never found amid the oil slick. Nile Kinnick was 24.

"I never had a shock like that in my life," said Al Couppee, blocking quarterback on the 1939 Hawkeyes. "Hell, I thought he was going to live forever."

Nile Kinnick's name certainly has. He was inducted into the charter class of the College Football Hall of Fame in 1951, and not only did the Hawkeyes retire his No. 24, they named the football stadium in his honor in 1972.