

## **Larry Lawrence: A J-Hawk icon passes**

Written by Mark Dukes

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It was the golden era of sports at Cedar Rapids Jefferson and he was its golden boy.

With his boyish good looks and remarkable athletic skills, Larry Lawrence was the pride of the west side. Young athletes idolized him and the multitude of other terrific athletes that competed for the J-Hawks in the 1960s.

In two seasons of football, Lawrence quarterbacked Jefferson to a 17-0-1 record, a mythical state championship in 1965 and back-to-back Mississippi Valley Conference crowns. In his senior season of basketball, Lawrence's 40-second dribbling exhibition and two free throws in the waning seconds solidified the 1967 state championship in come-from-behind fashion.

Lawrence died last week at the age of 63 in Galveston, Texas, of edema (swelling of the brain). He had a heart transplant in 2004.

Lawrence is recognized as one of the most outstanding athletes in Metro area history. He is one of only eight Metro high school products to play in the National Football League, and one of only two to play quarterback in the NFL (Kurt Warner of Regis is the other).

Jefferson athletics flourished in the 1960s. Numerous athletes in football and basketball advanced to the college level, and a couple went to the Canadian Football League. The track program also was terrific, as the J-Hawks were state runnerup in '67 and Doug Lane set a national interscholastic shot put record. The wrestling team had seven straight top-eight state finishes, including a title in 1962.

They all were products of Roosevelt and Wilson junior high schools on the west side (Taft had not yet opened). Lawrence was born in Mount Pleasant, but moved to Cedar Rapids for his junior high school years when his father, Ted, became the Jefferson football coach in 1960.

Ted Lawrence won a MVC football title in 1963, the start of a span in which Jefferson was unbeaten in 38 straight games (36-0-2). His son was a big part of it.

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Layne McDowell was an all-state lineman at Jefferson and later a star at Iowa and seven-year player in the CFL. McDowell went to Wilson junior high and competed against Lawrence and his Roosevelt teams during those years, but they later became high school teammates and college roommates at Iowa.

“He was an unbelievable competitor with unbelievable athletic skills,” McDowell said. “Probably the greatest clutch player I’ve ever been around.”

In the 1965 regular season finale, No. 1-ranked and undefeated Jefferson was pitted against No. 2 Davenport Central . The game was televised by WMT (now KGAN) in Cedar Rapids and WOC in Davenport, and drew an estimated 12,000 fans to Kingston Stadium.

“At that time, there were only three TV channels and very little outside entertainment like today,” said B.J. Trickey, a teammate of Lawrence’s since seventh grade and a terrific athlete in his own right. “When we were sophomores, the seniors came up to us and told us they didn’t expect us to screw up the tradition. We were really confident we were going to win every game.”

Lawrence, a rare starting quarterback as a junior, engineered a fourth-quarter drive that led to a 20-18 victory over Davenport Central, capped by his 12-yard scoring run with 1:11 remaining. Lawrence twice ran for fourth-down conversions during the drive.

Lawrence was named fifth-team all-state by the Des Moines Register. Three of his teammates were first team – end Scoop Hellenthal, lineman Bill Bevill and fullback Jon Meskimen.

Ted Lawrence resigned after the '65 season to take an assistant coaching job at Iowa. Jack Fisk took over and the J-Hawks hardly missed a beat. They went 8-0-1 with a tie against Davenport Central. Lawrence, McDowell and end Larry Baker were first-team all-staters, Tim Kelley and Bob Kohl third-teamers.

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Not to be outdone was the basketball team. Jefferson lost only one game during the regular season and breezed into the state championship game against the great Dick Gibbs and Ames. Jefferson trailed by as many as 15 points in the second half of the title game, but stormed back and sent the game to overtime.

Lawrence dribbled around the perimeter for nearly 40 seconds before he was fouled. He canned two free throws that sealed a 72-71 victory and the state championship.

“When things got tougher, Larry got tougher,” said Trickey, a first-team all-stater that year. “He was so good in the clutch. All of us had big egos but we kind of put them aside in basketball because we just wanted to win.”

Trickey, McDowell and others knew Lawrence had a free-wheeling personality, but it became more public as he went through his college and professional career.

“He marched to the beat of a different drummer. He wasn’t a conformist and he was flashy,” McDowell said.

Trickey had similar recollections. “He played athletics hard and he lived life hard,” he said.

Lawrence was Iowa’s starting quarterback in 1968 and ’69, accumulating 2,987 passing yards and 17 touchdowns. But in the winter of 1970, he decided to transfer to Miami (Fla.) amidst racial tensions on the Iowa campus and unrest over Ray Nagel’s coaching. Lawrence refused to play another season for Nagel and allegedly became involved in a controversial move to oust him.

Lawrence never played a down at Miami, though, opting instead to go to the CFL. He played a season in Calgary and a season in Montreal, with mixed success. Lawrence decided he had had enough of football after the 1971 season and was out of football for two years.

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In an October 1974 story in the Montreal Gazette, Lawrence said, “I was totally disgusted. I had lost my interest. I was finding it difficult to apply the concentration which the game demanded. I had been totally immersed with football for 13 years – since I was nine years old. My dad was a football coach. From August to December, football was my total life. I was just fed up.”

Lawrence became a relative nomad for two years. He first went on a cross-country motorcycle trip with a friend through Canada. Then, when he was bartending at the Sir Winston Churchill Pub in Montreal, he and five others decided to take a sailing trip from Montreal to Florida through the inland waterways.

This was Lawrence’s time to play hard, and he was still in his early 20s.

But his thirst to play football was renewed when he got an opportunity with the NFL Oakland Raiders. Lawrence made the team as a backup quarterback in 1974 behind Ken Stabler and Daryl Lamonica. In ’75, he backed up Stabler and David Humm in Oakland, witnessing George Blanda’s final pro season.

Lawrence played in nine NFL games, starting one in each of his seasons in Oakland. In both campaigns, the Raiders fell one win short of making the Super Bowl, losing to Pittsburgh in the AFC finals both years. In 1976, Lawrence had a brief stint with the expansion Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Then, he was done.

Lawrence had various business interests after his playing career, including ownership of a fitness gym called Ra Power in Cedar Rapids. Many of his former Jefferson teammates had fallen out of contact with him in recent years.

In the end, Larry Lawrence couldn’t overcome his health issues. Over time, the golden era became the golden years for one of Cedar Rapids’ most remarkable athletes.