

Tom Harmon

Michigan 41 California 0

September 28, 1940

Tom Harmon was the top headliner in a year of exceptional players and exceptional football teams. As a runner he combined sprinter speed, the power of an old fashioned, line-busting fullback and rare intelligence, a nifty change of pace, and skillful use of blockers in an open field. And he performed with splendid poise in all facets of the game, offensively and defensively.

Michigan, on a dry field, was by far the strongest team of 1940. But the Wolverines lost a 7-6 game, and the national title, to Minnesota in the mud. Michigan opened the 1940 season against California (4-6 record) by turning what was expected to be a close match into a rout. Only one other opponent beat Cal by as much as two touchdowns, and most Bear games were decided by six points or less. Unbeaten Stanford edged past Cal by just 13-7. It was Harmon's birthday and he ran wild against the Bears in as brilliant a performance as any ever accomplished by all the storied stars in Michigan's great football history.

Harmon returned the opening kickoff 94 yards to paydirt. It all happened so fast he was virtually untouched, and ran straightaway from the pursuit. The Wolverines lost another touchdown in the first quarter when Harmon's pass was dropped on the goal line. He contributed his most exciting touchdown run early in the second period, a 72-yard punt return. Harmon fumbled the kick, chased the ball back 10 yards before gaining possession, and then ran all over the field, covering at least 100 yards before reaching the endzone.

Next was a reverse play off the single wing with Harmon circling end. One defender was in a perfect spot to stop the play, but Harmon ran right over him. The last defender came out of the stands, a fan who made a solid tackle attempt, only to be brushed aside too, as Harmon completed an 86-yard scoring journey. His third of four conversion kicks made the count 21-0, and Harmon retired with six minutes left in the half.

The rest is anti-climatic. Harmon sat out the entire third quarter, then returned in the final period to lead two touchdown marches, cracking six yards through tackle for his fourth score, and passing five yards for yet another tally to cap off Michigan's 41-0 win. From the line of scrimmage Harmon lost a few yards attempting to pass, yet his net gain for the day was still 131 yards in 16 carries, an 8.2 average gain per carry.

By Bernie McCarty