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1979 Holiday Bowl oral history: Bolstered by trip to Tijuana and timely prayer, IU stunned BYU

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BLOOMINGTON – For the men who lived it, the 1979 IU football season began years earlier.

That team was built by the dogged recruiting of Lee Corso, and led by a group of experienced players who had grown up together in the rough-and-tumble Big Ten.

That group knew it was good. When assistant coach Bob Otoliski challenged the Hoosiers to “be Neil Armstrong” — to be the first IU team to win a bowl game — he wasn’t dealing in fantasy.

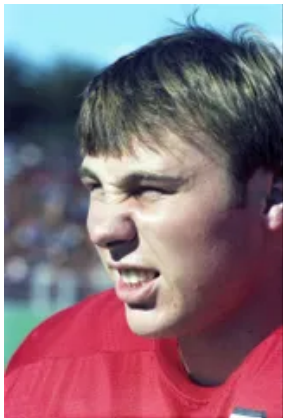
“It was a very special team,” defensive back Tim Wilbur said.

Those Hoosiers erased a huge deficit at Iowa, went 2-0 against the SEC, finished ranked in the top 20 and ended BYU’s undefeated season just before Christmas in San Diego. This is their story.

1979 was Corso’s seventh season in Bloomington. After a rocky beginning picking up the pieces of the John Pont era, Corso had won 14 games over the previous three seasons, narrowly missing out on winning records twice. In ’79, he returned an experienced team, with veterans such as Terry Tallen and Mike Friede anchoring a confident locker room. He was breaking in a new quarterback, Tim Clifford, from Cincinnati Colerain.

Bob Hammel, sportswriter, Bloomington Herald-Times: Tim Clifford was kind of the perfect quarterback for Lee. I think they were a lot alike, being willing to take chances and kind of relishing the fact that they were gonna be disrespected by BYU in (the Holiday Bowl), but by the league in general. I remember (former Ohio State coach) Woody Hayes, at one of the Big Ten luncheons, intended to compliment Lee, but he called him Lou. Lee, he brought that up a few times.

Corso: (Clifford was) a great leader, but the thing about it is, he never once lost his cool. He was a cool customer.



Mark Deal in 1978. (Photo: Courtesy IU Archives)

Corso scheduled tough in the nonconference in the 1970s, taking the Hoosiers to Nebraska, Washington and LSU. Those schedules, then-graduate assistant Mark Deal contends, kept the Hoosiers out of bowl games in earlier seasons, but hardened them for 1979.

Deal: This wasn’t the ’67 (Indiana) Rose Bowl team that went 1-8-1 and last in the Big Ten in ’66 and then out of nowhere went 9-1 and won the Big Ten and went to the Rose Bowl. This had been building.

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Terry Tallen, defensive lineman/team captain: That ’78 team was 4-7, and we had hoped to do better, and we’d worked to do better. We came back with an edge that next year.

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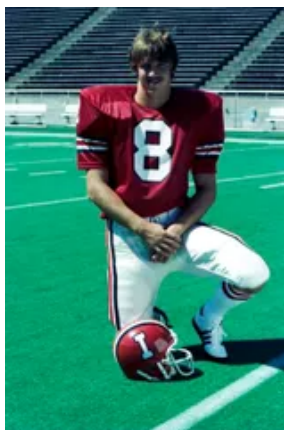
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Hammel: (The preseason feeling was) somewhat comparable to right now: that there’s a pretty decent team there. They just need to win some games.

Indiana began the season with a trip to Iowa. Hayden Fry would become a legend in Iowa City, advancing to three Rose Bowls, but in 1979, he was in year one on the coaching job. The Hawkeyes had lost three-straight to IU, including two at home. When they burst out to a 26-3 lead at halftime, everyone was surprised.



Tim Wilbur in 1978. (Photo: Courtesy of IU Archives)

Tim Wilbur, defensive back/punt returner: We were kind of young, and the first half, we got our butts whipped a little bit.

At halftime, the Hoosiers rallied. As Hammel and Max Skirvin broke down the half on IU's radio broadcast, Hammel remarked that either Iowa was much better than people expected, or Indiana would mount some kind of comeback.

The Hoosiers did.

Tallen: We were determined to go out and win that ballgame. The way Tim Clifford played, the way (running back) Lonnie Johnson played, the way Mike Harkrader played, the way a number of guys played, it was very inspirational for us on the defensive side, to pretty much shut them out the rest of the game.

Behind Clifford and running backs Johnson and Harkrader, IU rallied. The Hoosiers started the second half with a 10-play touchdown drive, capped by a 51-yard pass from Clifford to Johnson.

Iowa would not score again. Johnson ran for a touchdown on the first play of the fourth quarter, then Clifford recovered from an interception by Iowa defensive back (and eventual national-champion Oklahoma coach) Bob Stoops to sneak into the end zone with 11:21 left.



Terry Tallen in 1980. (Photo: Indiana University Archives)

Indiana's rally looked dead when the Hoosiers missed a short field goal with 2:41 to play. But on Iowa's next drive, Tallen stopped running back Dennis Mosley for a critical no gain on second down, and then Phil Suess threw an incomplete pass. The Hawkeyes had to punt one more time, downing the ball on a fair catch at the IU 34. Corso called on Johnson.

Deal: Ran a wheel route.

Hammel: Lonnie Johnson coming out of the backfield going down the sideline, and Tim Clifford hit him for a touchdown.

One of the enduring images of that season shows Johnson racing up the sideline, Stoops in futile pursuit. The comeback was complete, and secured on the last play of the game, when Suess threw an interception.

Clifford: The Iowa game kind of was the catapult for us, but we expected it. That's the best word I can use. The expectation was we're gonna win, we're gonna compete in every single game.

Corso: We make a comeback like we did, I think that was the spark that gave the guys the confidence to be a great football team. ... That was the making of that football team.



Iu quarterback Tim Clifford in 1978. (Photo: Courtesy of IU Archives)

The Hoosiers followed Iowa with a pair of wins over SEC teams, Vanderbilt and Kentucky, both at home, before losing narrowly at Colorado to complete their nonconference schedule. They returned to Big Ten play at Wisconsin, against a team that had beaten Indiana 34-7 in Madison the season before.

Deal: We won 3-0, kicked a field goal in the first quarter, I think we turned them over four times. We ended the game on a 92-yard drive that took 12 minutes and we didn't score.

Corso: It was 4th-and-1 ½ on our own 20 (during that final drive), and I went for it. We made it. We moved the ball down there and shut them out.

Corso acknowledges now how unconventional the decision to go for it on fourth down was, so deep in his own territory during such a tight game. But he had faith enough in his team to not just call for that conversion, but also to endorse a fourth-down try near the end of the game at the other end of the field, rather than kick a second field goal.

Corso: I did not kick a field goal, because I didn't want to lose the game 7-6. We went for it on fourth down on about the 5-yard line. ... It was the same type of situation (as Iowa). They never gave up. That team had great leadership. That's hard to do, to go to a Big Ten team and shut them out in their own place.

Indiana followed that with a healthy defeat at the hands of Ohio State, the Buckeyes on their way to an 11-0 regular season in Earl Bruce's first season as head coach. Then Corso's team returned home to shut out Northwestern, 30-0, before a fascinating encounter at Michigan.

Four years earlier, in Corso's third season in charge, IU lost 55-7 in Ann Arbor. That day, Corso promised himself he'd build a team that could stand toe-to-toe with Bo Schembechler's Wolverines.



Indiana coach Lee Corso embraces his close friend Doc Aherns after IU defeated previously unbeaten BYU in the Holiday Bowl, Dec. 22, 1979 in San Diego. (Photo: Lenny Ignelzi, AP)

Corso: I said someday, we're gonna come back up here and play them man to man.

Mike Friede, wide receiver: When I realized how good we were was when we lost to Michigan. I know that's kind of a stupid thing, but god dang, we had 105,000 people dead quiet.

It was homecoming in Ann Arbor, and Michigan duly responded by building a 21-7 lead. But the Hoosiers dug in and clawed back two scores.

Corso will say he kicked the extra point to ensure the tie, and walk out of Michigan Stadium with a result to match his promise to himself made years earlier. Deal points out IU had just one loss in conference play at that point, theoretically still in the hunt for a conference title. Clifford believes Corso might have been tempted to go for two had Clifford not pinched a nerve in his shoulder diving on a fumble only moments earlier.

Whatever the reason, when Clifford hit tight end Dave Harangody for a touchdown with 55 seconds left, Indiana looked poised to leave Ann Arbor with a share of the spoils. What followed remains one of the most improbable (and for Michigan fans, beloved) plays in Big Ten history.

Friede: The illegal play that coach still talks about?

Tallen: We were cheated. There's no two ways about it.

Out of timeouts, Michigan took one last snap just short of the 50. Quarterback John Wangler dumped the ball down to Lawrence Reid who, recognizing he was about to be tackled in bounds, threw the ball to the sideline intentionally to stop the clock. It actually landed in Corso's hands.

Corso: I should've went down and spiked it!

By rule, Reid should not have been allowed to intentionally fumble the ball out of bounds to stop the clock, which should have run out. But officials allowed Michigan one more snap with six seconds left. This time, Wangler found Anthony Carter, just as two IU defensive backs ran into one another. Stepping around them, Carter turned upfield and outran one more Hoosier to the end zone for the game-winning score as time expired.

Deal: That was taken away from us. Absolutely taken away from us.



Afterward, two referees boarded Indiana's bus and told Corso the end of the game had been botched.

Friede: When I was playing in the USFL and (Carter) was with the Michigan Panthers, I get to the stadium, and AC comes up, he goes, 'Mike, are you still mad at me?' I go, 'Yes, I'm still mad at you!' ...

I don't know how many years ago it was, but my son had a little tape, and it was "fantastic finishes." He goes, 'Dad, were you in this game?' I go in there, and it's AC running down the middle of the field into the end zone. 'Yeah, I was in that game. I was in that game, and where'd you get that tape? Let's throw it away.'

Hammel: Even though they took a very disheartening loss there at Michigan, it still had its positive side. It was more of an uplifting loss than a depressing one.

Tallen: We felt the pain, and we used that as a motivator.

Indiana won its next two games, home to Minnesota and at Illinois, by a combined 49 points. The Garden State Bowl, held at the Meadowlands in New Jersey, showed interest. So did the Holiday Bowl in San Diego.

Despite an Old Oaken Bucket game loss, there was a sense the Hoosiers had clinched a berth when they hit seven wins. Slumping back into the locker room after a 37-21 defeat against No. 12 Purdue, the Hoosiers found a man dressed in a sport coat waiting for them.

Deal: We're distraught that we lost to Purdue like you always are, the loser of that game, and there's a guy in there in a sport coat, Vinnie Vinson, the chairman of the Holiday Bowl, who immediately offered us a bid to the Holiday Bowl right after the game.

You go from despair to roaring cheers in the locker room, after losing to Purdue. It was really the weirdest Purdue result I ever was around.

The Hoosiers were confirmed to play top-10 BYU. Legendary coach LaVell Edwards had just completed the first of what would eventually be six seasons in seven with double-digit wins. Brigham Young came to San Diego 11-0, and a heavy favorite.

That year, the Holiday Bowl was played on Dec. 21, so the Hoosiers began preparations right after the Purdue loss. Corso put his teams through rigorous practices in the late-fall cold at Memorial Stadium — full pads, long days, hard hits.



Coach Lee Corso exhaults his Indiana Hoosiers at practice before Friday night's Holiday Bowl football game on December 20, 1979 San Diego. (AP Photo/Lenny Ignelzi) (Photo: Lenny Ignelzi, AP)

Friede: I think coach wanted, after that Purdue loss, to get us back on the field, get our confidence level back up. Do the things in practice we were really good at — running the option against our defense, throwing the ball the way we threw the ball.

We worked really hard in Bloomington, and when we got on the plane in Indianapolis, Evergreen Airways, to go out to San Diego, you couldn't be around a bunch of loser guys.

Corso reversed his approach once his team got to California. In place of rigorous practices, he handed his players significant freedom. They were required simply to check in for breakfast and attend practices, which were often run without pads.

Deal: Coach Corso had two rules for the team when we got there: Make sure you show up to breakfast every morning, and have a clean shirt on.

Tallen: We've got guys getting rent-a-wrecks, big old, almost limousine things, and hauling everybody around. We're on the beach, and just checking in at breakfast. It was quite the experience.

Corso believed he could trust his team, and he wanted everyone to enjoy the bowl trip.

Deal played Torrey Pines golf course. Wilbur took his girlfriend to the zoo. At one point, Corso allegedly organized a team trip to Tijuana, something everyone remembers but no one will admit to having taken part in.

Friede: I can honestly say I did not get on the bus to Tijuana. I saw the pictures after the fact, but I did not get on the bus.

While the Hoosiers unwound, BYU practiced hard: full pads, sometimes twice a day. The two teams participated in bowl activities together, and there was for Indiana an inescapable feeling the Cougars didn't hold IU in very high regard.

Deal: They weren't thrilled about playing the fourth-placed team in the Big Ten, and they made it known. We had a little chip on our shoulder because of that. We, frankly, felt a little disrespected. They thought they should be playing in the Cotton Bowl, playing Texas, and it helped us.

Hammel: Indiana wasn't very well-respected going in. That all played into it. I think Indiana players sensed that, and even on the field, they sensed that.

The game turned into a classic.

Clifford passed for 171 yards and a score. Marc Wilson, his counterpart, won co-bowl MVP honors with 380 passing yards and three total touchdowns. But he also threw three interceptions, and the lead changed hands eight times. Eventually, a game featuring 874 combined yards of offense turned on special teams.

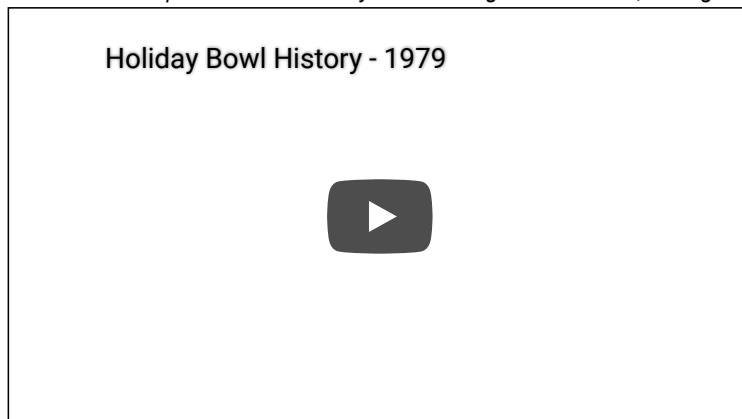
Hammel: It was a very daring play.

Down 37-31 in the fourth quarter, Wilbur dropped back to field a BYU punt in IU territory. Wilbur let the ball hit inside the 40 before he saw it hit a teammate.

Wilbur: It hit and it bounced off Craig Walls' back, and I knew I had to go get it. I was getting ready to fall on it, and as Lee said, it was like an act of God, saying here, Tim, pick it up. It bounced up right in stride. Caught it in stride and took off.

Tallen: We would tease Tim Wilbur: If you were to run a 40-yard dash with him, even if you were a lineman, you might beat him in that 40-yard dash. Tim never looked fast, but the thing about Tim Wilbur, nobody ever caught Tim Wilbur from behind.

No one did. Wilbur took the punt return back 62 yards for the go-ahead score, setting the stage for one of the most-repeated stories in IU football history.



As time ticked down in the fourth quarter, BYU moved the ball deep inside Indiana territory. There were just seven seconds left when Edwards sent Brent Johnson on to try a 27-yard field goal. Corso turned to Father James Higgins, his longtime friend and sideline companion, with a plea.

Corso: I said, 'Father Higgins, it's you against two million Mormons. Can you do it?' He put his head down, and said, 'It's done.'

As legends do, the number changes depending upon who's telling the story. What doesn't change is the result: Johnson's kick sailed to the left as time expired. Indiana had won the Holiday Bowl, its first postseason victory ever.

Tallen: You look at the tape now, you can't tell if it was blocked, squibbed or divine intervention. The ball goes off to the side. Coach Corso throws his arms up in the air and says, 'Thank God!' Father Higgins pats him on the back and says, 'You're welcome.'



Father Higgins (left) in 1978, a year before he may have played a key role in IU's Holiday Bowl victory. (Photo: Courtesy IU Archives)

IU finished that season ranked No. 16 in the coaches' poll, and No. 19 according to the media. Friede, Clifford and others would go on to play in the NFL, and Clifford won the Chicago Tribune Silver Football trophy as Big Ten most valuable player.

The team itself has stayed remarkably close, both to the program and to each other.

Tallen committed a multimillion-dollar donation just last year that helped spark wide-scale renovation of IU's locker room and team facilities. (<https://www.indystar.com/picture-gallery/sports/college/indiana/2019/08/28/iu-football-locker-room-renovations-revealed/2146238001/>). When Indiana had its 40th-anniversary celebration honoring the 1979 Holiday Bowl team earlier this year, he was one of 105 players, coaches and managers who returned to celebrate one of the best seasons in Indiana history.

Tallen: We've been saying this for 40 years: We were a brotherhood of warriors.

When they do get together, old teammates reconnect as if they never left the locker room. They know about each other's wives and children, moves and jobs, everything. And they certainly know, to a man, that they met Otolski's challenge.

Deal: Coach O, he told us the whole time, he said, 'Men, we want to be Neil Armstrong.' What he meant by that was, we'd be the first. First man on the moon. We want to be the first team at IU to win a bowl game. That fact is very important to the 1979 Hoosiers, that we were the first IU team to win a bowl game. That means a lot to us. It really does.

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