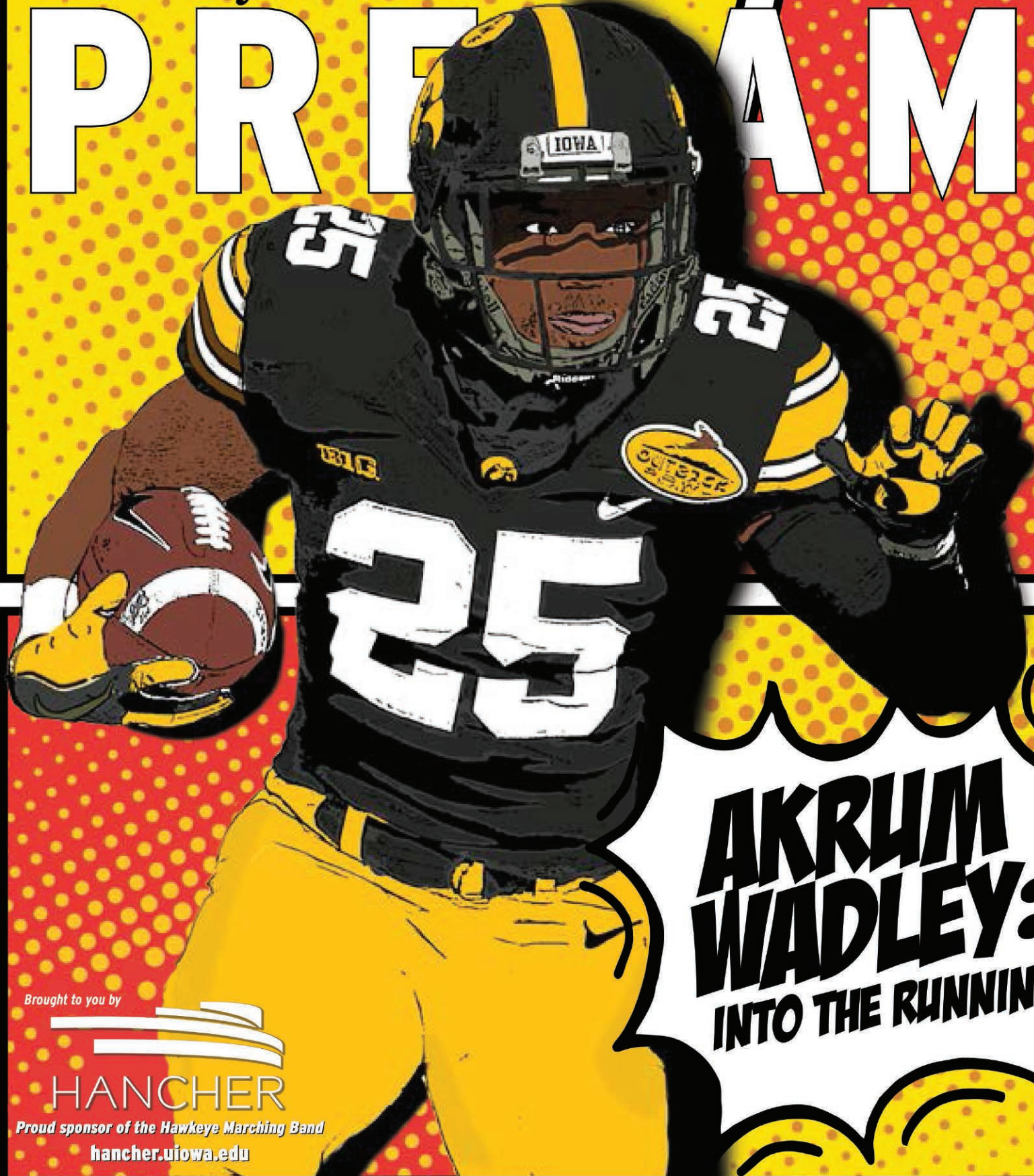


SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 2 | IOWA VS. WYOMING | KINNICK STADIUM | 11 A.M., BTN

The Daily Iowan

PREGAME



**AKRUM
WADLEY:
INTO THE RUNNING**

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COVER STORY

Into the Running

Iowa running back Akrum Wadley embraces senior leadership.

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Sharonda Phelps long knew her son was meant to be a running back. When he was a boy, she couldn't get him to sit still.

So when she went to Akrum Wadley's first football scrimmage, Phelps was surprised to see the third-grader positioned at center.

"I went to the coach, and I said, 'What's going on?'" Phelps said. "He said he needed someone who knows football to be the center.

"I said, 'My son ain't no damn center. My son is a running back.'"

The next time Wadley suited up, he wasn't put at center. He was handed the ball on the first play of the game and ran it all the way for his first touchdown.

It's a good thing that Phelps talked to the coach after that first scrimmage. Now, 13 years later, Wadley has the opportunity to solidify himself as one of the best running backs for Iowa during the Kirk Ferentz era.

Phelps has been a guiding light for all the tough decisions Wadley has had to make throughout his life and has helped lead him to where he is today.

"My mother, I always go with her decisions. She's never been wrong," Wadley said. "She's been right, so I always roll with her decision."

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Wadley originally committed to Temple before signing with Iowa. In fact, he was visiting that university when he got his first phone call from the Hawkeyes.

He and Phelps visited Iowa City on Feb. 1, 2013, and committed two days later.

Wadley didn't get much attention from Division-1 schools. Other than Temple and Iowa, the only other program that reached out to the two-star recruit was Miami (Florida).

Although Iowa was far from home in New Jersey, Phelps could rest easily knowing Wadley was in a place where he would be happy on and off the field and where temptation was limited.

"I didn't want my son in Florida," Phelps said. "I thought he might get crazy."

Like many newcomers, Wadley redshirted his freshman year for the Hawkeyes. Not playing was an adjustment for both Wadley



File Photo/The Daily Iowan

Iowa running back Akrum Wadley celebrates after scoring a touchdown during the Iowa-North Texas game in Kinnick Stadium on Sept. 26, 2015.

and his family. He had never gone a full year without seeing game action, and they were not used to not seeing him play.

Wadley and Phelps talked often during that first year. Her goal during his time off the field was to keep him out of trouble and away from distractions such as drinking and partying. She wanted her son to stay focused.

She did know that avoiding temptation completely was probably unrealistic, though.

"You can be at the party, but when you're an athlete, they're watching you. You have to carry yourself different," Phelps said. "But he's never had a problem with not going out. If I tell him to stay in for the night, he'll do it. He's not that kid that has to be out there; I think he just does it because it's part of having

something to do other than school."

Throughout his career with the Hawkeyes, Wadley has been able to keep himself out of trouble off the field. Rather, it was on the field where he struggled more.

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In 2014, the wait was finally over, and Wadley finally got the chance to step on the field in a black and gold uniform.

Unfortunately, that didn't happen a whole lot during his redshirt freshman season.

Wadley was handed the ball 33 times that year, and although he averaged 5.6 yards a carry, he lost two fumbles and seemed to be unreliable and undersized.

Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz never hesitated to comment on Wadley's weight or ball skills. He didn't see much playing time in 2014 because Ferentz did not think Wadley made the amount of progress that others did during their redshirt years.

"He's undersized, obviously. He's a little bit thin right now," Ferentz said in a press conference on Nov. 1, 2014. "Last year, he didn't make a huge jump like a lot of guys in their first year ... There are a lot of things he can improve on, starting with ball security."

Ferentz did give him a chance that year, though.

Of the 186 rushing yards he posted in 2014,

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172 of them came in the first two games he saw touches in that season: Northwestern and Minnesota.

At that time, Wadley was behind a couple of experienced guys in Mark Weisman and Jordan Canzeri.

But Wadley's mother reminded him to be patient.

"It was tough for him ... You just have to learn how to turn the other cheek, and it makes you work even harder," Phelps said. "I said, 'When they call your number, they're going to see what you can really do.'"

That's what happened when Wadley got an opportunity in the 2015 Northwestern game. Ferentz said this was a turning point in his mind.

LeShun Daniels was out with an injury before the game started, and senior Jordan Canzeri left the field early and returned with a boot. Wadley had to come to the rescue.

"That was the day that Akrum really took a major step forward, I think, in his performance," Ferentz said. "He just understood we needed him, we were counting on him; he delivered beautifully, and since that time, he's just grown with each and every week."

In that game, Wadley put up 204 yards on 26 attempts, while notching 24 of Iowa's 40 points in a 40-10 rout of the Wildcats.

Wadley garnered 257 more yards in the next seven games in 2015, but that was nothing compared with what he would do his junior season.

Over the course of 13 games, Wadley recorded 1,081 yards rushing and 315 receiving while putting up 13 total touchdowns. He led the team in rushing and total yards and averaged 6.4 yards per carry.

After the Outback Bowl last season, Wadley and his family sat down to discuss the possibility of ditching his last year of eligibility and entering the NFL.

His numbers, although good, were not enough to persuade Phelps. Had it not been for his mother, Wadley's impatience would have turned his attention straight to the NFL Draft.

"I know Akrum, and I know his patience level. He wouldn't have cared if he was the last one to get drafted, as long as he went," Phelps said. "I said, 'There's no guarantee. You go back to school, you get your degree, and there are more things available to you.'"

She added that one more year in college would give the family a better idea of where Wadley would stand in the draft and would give him the opportunity to showcase his talent and prove himself for one more year.

Wadley had known for a long time that it's best to listen to mom.

"My mother definitely put a lot of pressure

on me to come back and put together two seasons back-to-back," Wadley said. "She encouraged me to do it one more time."

He listened, so Wadley will return and make his senior debut Saturday against Wyoming.

As one of the oldest and most experienced Hawkeyes, Wadley knows the importance of his role both on and off the field.

"I look at things different. I'm a leader now. I have to cut down on the mental mistakes. Last year, the few years ... I had mental mistakes, and it didn't really matter because I was still learning," Wadley said. "Now, I'm going into my last season, and everything is all-in right now. I can't make mental mistakes, and I can't make any type of mistakes, because I've got guys behind me looking up to me."

His leadership role started at home. When Wadley travels back to Newark, New Jersey, Phelps said, he likes to go back to his high-school team and talk to them about what it takes to play at a Division-1 level, the importance of staying focused, and being away from home for the first time.

It also translates at home, where Wadley has three younger brothers who look up to him.

"When they're all here, man, they love to play fight. The 14-year-old, Donovan, he's an exact copy of Akrum. The two of them challenge each other in basketball, video games, everything," Phelps said. "Donovan dreads the fact that he can't beat him. I told Akrum that he has to let him win sometimes."

Wadley told her no. He wants to teach his younger brother to be patient and earn it, just as he did.

One thing Wadley does before every meeting is write down three things he'd like to improve on each day. These include such things as focusing on one rep at a time and making sure he stays hydrated.

He is determined to only progress and avoid any steps backward.

Both Kirk Ferentz and Brian Ferentz have noted that Wadley has done a good job with keeping the younger guys in his running-back group in check.

He wants to make sure that they are ready to go at any time, because anything can happen. Wadley is proof of that.

"I've really seen him grow up in this regard; I think he does a really nice job with our younger players," offensive coordinator Brian Ferentz said. "He's a guy who can reach out and help some of those young guys, those freshmen, that we're going to count on this year and show them, 'Hey, this is the way to do it. I've been through the good, the bad; I've seen it all here."



File Photo/The Daily Iowan
Iowa running back Akrum Wadley runs down the field during the Iowa-Northwestern game on Oct. 17, 2015. Wadley rushed for 204 yards during the game, and the Hawkeyes beat the Wildcats, 40-10.



Joseph Cress/The Daily Iowan
Iowa running back Akrum Wadley high-fives a fan after signing a poster during the annual Kids' Day at Kinnick Stadium on Aug. 12. The Hawkeyes will open nonconference play against Wyoming at 11 a.m. on Saturday.