

A New Beginning Yet to Start

Barry Fries's future has already been affected by the coaching carousel of college athletics

By Tyler Cooney, Editor-in-Chief

On April 5, 2025, then junior Barry Fries thought his collegiate future was settled as he committed to the Iowa State Cyclones football program. An accomplished feeling set in knowing his hard work had paid off and his dreams were coming true. Committing to a Power 5 school in the Big 12 conference is a feat not many can say they have accomplished.

Fries planned to graduate from Elkhorn North High School early after the fall semester of his senior year, leave his high school friends behind, and start his new journey of Division 1 football as Iowa State wanted Fries to come down to their facilities early for spring training. With only a few weeks until he needed to have his bags packed, Fries received gut-wrenching news about the departure of Cyclones head coach Matt Campbell. Before the news broke out, rumors had circulated of Campbell leaving, but Fries and the other ISU commits just tried to shake off the possibility.

"There were talks of it happening and I didn't really know what to think, but I was just taking it day by day," Fries said. "When the news finally came out, while I was in my creative writing class, I instantly went to [ENHS head football coach Sam] Stanley to get his opinion and he just reassured me that the program was still going to be intact and I shouldn't worry too much."

The head coach of a college football program believing in him enough to give him this opportunity meant a lot to Fries. With Campbell's decision to leave, Fries and his family stressed and cried together over the loss and the worry that another program might not give him a chance.

"Barry's a tremendous prospect and a great football player and we knew the demand for him would still be high after we heard the news," Stanley said.

Campbell left Iowa State and took the head coaching position at Penn State University, a Big 10 college program where he would have more financial power and a greater chance for success, as well as a place where he has family ties. Campbell then began reaching out to several of his ISU commits, offering them a spot to play for him and his new team in Pennsylvania. However, Fries's phone was dry. No messages from Campbell and no phone calls from the new Cyclone staff, just a mind filled with unanswered questions and prayers.

"My screen time was roughly 12 hours a day and I was just constantly refreshing my phone waiting for something to happen," Fries said. "It was the longest week of my life and it seriously felt like each day was a month."

Roughly a week went by and Fries still has no idea what to do. He finally heard from the new Iowa State coaching staff but they didn't bring the same energy that Campbell and the old staff brought.



Bella Smith

Senior linebacker Barry Fries celebrates with his offense as they come on the field after the defense gets a stop. Fries is one of five captains on the team and commands the defense with his energy and passion for winning.

“The old staff took a chance and a gamble on me since all I had was my junior film [at that time] and didn’t have any other intangibles that showed off my skill like a 40-yard dash time,” Fries said. “When I got a call from the new staff I felt like it was a weak phone call and they made it clear I wouldn’t fit their new defensive scheme, so I pulled my papers from Iowa State.”

The whole process of being snubbed out by Iowa State and then not given the opportunity at Penn State from his assumed coach made Fries quickly realize the reality of college athletics and the business side of it.

“The timing was extremely unfortunate,” Stanley said. “There were schools that were interested in Barry and would’ve loved to have him but they had filled all their spots already.”

College athletics is a changing landscape every year and opened the eyes of Fries to the power the transfer portal holds. At the time of Campbell’s leaving, the transfer portal was just one month away from opening and it made less sense for a school to take a chance on a highschooler when they could instead get a veteran player who has proven themselves at the college level already.

“Why would colleges take a chance on me when they can go for a guy that’s 250 pounds, has hair on his chest, with three years of film, and has proven himself at the college level already,” Fries said.

While those close to Fries feel bad for the way he was left in the dust by a program he thought believed in him, it’s difficult for colleges to think that way as they want to win and can’t think too deeply about how each recruit is going to react to every move they make.

“A lot of people in the college football world are like used car salesmen in the way they approach it as a business. They are going to tell you what you want to hear and build a relationship until they get what they want,” Fries said. “So when Campbell and his staff just got up and left, it put me in an unfortunate situation because I knew some commits were being contacted but all I could do was wait and scroll on Twitter consistently.”

Fries understands that college athletics is a business with moving pieces every year. Because of this, it is harder for players to actually buy-in to the program they are given an opportunity at.

“The transfer portal hurts the culture for college sports. It’s incredibly hard for programs to get their players to buy in for the four full years,” Fries said. “College sports are very transactional now and while yes it gives players more opportunities, it makes them only think about what their next step is. Personally I don’t want to have that mentality and instead want to be in the moment and know where I’m at currently.”

With Fries now having to start back at square one with his recruiting process, this made it even more challenging as many schools didn’t have extra scholarships to give out. However, after hearing and reading the news, Coach Dan Jackson of South Dakota State University wasted no time and dialed up Barry’s number.

“Once I pulled my papers, Coach Jackson immediately called me and we had a conversation on what my next move might be,” Fries said. “He was very empathetic with me and understood the situation I had been thrown into, and I really appreciated that because he approached it like a man.”

After the conversation with SDSU, Fries discussed seriously with his family what his next move should be as the transfer portal was set to open up on January 2 of the new year. Emotions were high and his family voiced their thoughts on where they thought he would fit best, but Fries understood that it was his future. He had the final decision and his parents would support him.

As Fries had the offer from SDSU on the table, all he had to do was sign the official paper naming him a Jackrabbit and his stress of the unknown would be lifted off his shoulders.

“I reached back out to Coach Jackson and told him that I’m 100% ready and I’m all in on South Dakota State,” Fries said.

With Fries’s new journey as a Jackrabbit just beginning, he has already taken on the role of a college athlete. He attends classes each day and practices with the team for lifts, conditioning, and skill work.

Many questioned Fries’s decision to attend a non Power-5 school and instead switch to an FCS school with less national media coverage. As Iowa State is in one of the most popular football conferences in the nation and South Dakota State is in the Missouri Valley Conference, there is a drastic difference in competition.

“I’m a freshman, I’m a bottom feeder. I need to scratch, bite, and claw for every opportunity that comes my way,” Fries said. “And while many see SDSU as a school with ‘less power’ and being on a ‘lower level,’ it’s a great opportunity for me to play Division 1 football at a winning program that has had recent success.”