

SMART AND TALENTED. ENOUGH?

BY DONALD CHASE

thought the picture was about, we made a deal. I'd put it out there and he'd shape it."

The character Harmon put out there is a hedonistic high school physical education teacher blackmailed into teaching a remedial reading course to an equally reluctant and unpromising group of students. The picture is about how the teacher's slowly evolving sense of responsibility to his charges helps them deal with such problems as alcoholism, dyslexia and pregnancy.

To an important degree, the character and the picture are also about Mark Harmon's own academic experience, which is broader and more faceted than his patented UCLA BMOC image suggests.

"It's about all those teachers who open up doors for you," he says. "And the way they do that is by taking the time to get to know you as an individual. There've been plenty of those—teachers and coaches and teacher-coaches—in my life, at the [Los Angeles] military high school I went to, at Pierce College [in Woodland Hills, Calif.] and at UCLA as an athlete.

"I've got to say that at first UCLA was so confused and confusing to me that I wondered if I shouldn't have chosen my other option, which was Oklahoma."

But the size and diversity of the student body at the West Los Angeles campus soon became "as much a part of the educational process as classes. I remember sitting in a jazz-appreciation class where the guy to my left was from Mozambique and the girl to my right from Scottsdale, Arizona. And maybe half the people didn't know that there even *was* a football team."

Among those who *did* know, quarterbacking the Bruins to 8-3 and 9-2 seasons in 1972 and 1973, respectively, gave Harmon "something of an identity. I don't remember being a big man on campus. I remember getting up early to go to classes [he was a communications major], followed by practice, followed by homework [he graduated cum laude]. And only occasional blow-outs where, he was sorry to tell the Coors people years later, "I drank whatever beer was on sale that week."

Harmon's face is exposed when he acts or

pitches Coors, and so, often enough, is his body or parts thereof—thus, the *People* sexiest-man encomium. "Oh, yeah, that title meant a lot to me," he winces. Then he explodes into laughter as he recalls, "When I met Mel Gibson," from whom he had taken over the title, "he said, 'Thank God!'"

"But the thing that I like best about acting is that it allows you to expose your emotions. It's also," he says, "the way in which acting differs most from football. As an athlete, your emotions are very tightly wrapped—because the athlete who shows his emotions, who acts out, is the one who gets penalized. I spent 17 years of my life



Harmon plays a physical education instructor blackmailed into teaching a remedial reading course in Summer School.

kicking dirt over my feelings, and now that I don't have to do that anymore I like myself a whole lot better.

"The similarity between the two is that they're both practice-makes-perfect things; what's important is the preparation and the process, the getting there instead of the being there." The mention of "getting there," even in the most literal sense, makes Harmon smile. "To me, now, being on a freeway with a container of coffee at 5:30 in the morning, on my way to a job I love, is a thrill, especially after working at things that didn't fulfill me."

Between UCLA and turning acting into a full-time, way-paying job, Harmon was an ad exec repping five Los Angeles-based radio stations, a geometry teacher at West

Point and a carpenter. In fact, teaching and carpentry still figure in his life. Last year he taught a UCLA Extension course that "people probably expected to be about acting, while my focus turned out to be 'Survival as an L.A.-Based Actor'—or 'Creative Waiting.' I'm not all that great at waiting myself, and one of the things that makes waiting easier is carpentry."

Harmon's major carpentry is the home he has built for himself in the Santa Monica Mountains. "I'd call it 'rustic,' the kind of place you're more likely to find in upstate New York than California," he responds when asked to describe it. "It's all stone and wood, all old-school craftsmanship, with a metal roof, so you can hear the rain."

"After sailing through this town all day, listening to all those terrifically encouraging but usually meaningless things you hear when you're between jobs, I can come home and look at this solid thing I built. And now that it's finished, I've been working on a 1949 'woodie' station wagon I just bought and helping friends build things for their houses."

Most of Harmon's close friends are "guys I've known a long time. One's a college roommate, another I've known since I was nine years old. That's not to say I don't find terrific camaraderie among my fellow actors, because I do."

Two actors with whom Harmon has reportedly found camaraderie—and then some—are Cristina Raines, a *Flamingo Road* co-worker, and, more recently, *My Sister Sam* star Pam Dawber. While Dawber told *People* magazine that she and Harmon were about to move in together (his house), Harmon is less direct. "I imagine I will [change my marital status] someday... I accept the fact that questions like this go with the territory, but I don't like feeling that I have to answer them. One of the things that I like most about the legendary actors of the '30s and '40s is that they were able to maintain something of a sense of mystery about themselves." ★

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