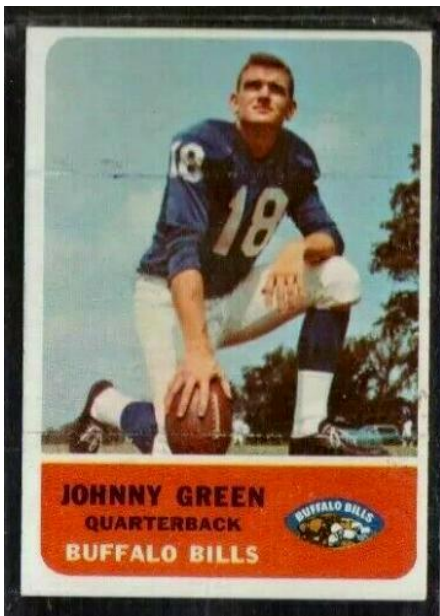


## Johnny Green

This article was written by Budd Bailey

Johnny Green probably would have been the first to tell you that one football game changed his life. It set him up for a post-football career, and it must have come up in conversation for the next 60 years or so.

Yet even though Green was a professional quarterback – a small fraternity - the big moment came in college. Let’s examine what led up to that game, and what happened after it.



John Edwards Green was born on October 12, 1937, in West Point, Mississippi. It’s a town located in the northeast portion of the state. Tupelo (the birthplace of Elvis Presley) is about 45 minutes due north, while Starkville – the home of Mississippi State University – is about less than half an hour away when traveling southwest.

Green attended West Point High School. He’s one of eight NFL players who were from that school. The best known of them might be Tom Goode, an offensive lineman with Houston, Miami, and Baltimore mostly in the 1960s. You might have guessed that Tom didn’t have any African American teammates or classmates at that point in history. A book on the school’s football history put it this way: “In 1967 Sylvester Harris became the first African-American athlete to wear the green and white. Harris broke the color



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barrier under freedom of choice and made the transition easier for those who followed under court-ordered desegregation, and West Point High School football entered a new era.”

Green apparently had a good senior season in 1954. The Green Wave finished with a 9-1 record, good for second place in the Little Ten Conference. West Point scored at least 30 points in every game but one during this magical year, one of the best in school history. That lone loss came against Starkville, and apparently it stung for years.

A report on the end of that game read this way: “The clock was winding down in the annual grudge match with Starkville, and West Point had the ball. Quarterback Johnny Green had thrown short passes for several downs, and Starkville had been in short coverage. George Barry told Green what he had noticed and asked the quarterback to throw the ball to him. As George stood in the end zone, Green threw the ball right into his chest ... but the ball just bounced off! George couldn’t believe his eyes. He was devastated. As the seconds ticked off, the game ended with Starkville the victor 14-13. That was the only loss West Point had that year.”

Green was called “the best quarterback in the history of West Point High School” by an unidentified source in a book about the school’s football program. By the way, John wore No. 66 as a junior and No. 77 as a senior. He played with two other future pros in Carey Henley and Thomas Goode.

After graduating in 1955, Green was off to play in college. He was recruited by Mississippi State, Memphis State, Mississippi Southern and Kentucky. A medical issue came up along the way, as one leg was shorter than the other. “I didn’t run well – I had a slight case of polio as a kid,” Green told author Jeffrey J. Miller. However, the University of Chattanooga took the lead in the recruiting battle, thanks to the efforts of former pro player Jack Gregory – whose son Jack Jr. played for the Browns and Giants. The head coach was E.C. “Scrappy” Moore, who had the job from 1931 to 1967 and who passed his nickname to the team mascot, “Scrappy Moc.” Chattanooga now uses Mocs, after the mockingbird (the Tennessee state bird), as its nickname.

Green’s four years on the varsity for Chattanooga couldn’t have been more mediocre. The team went 5-4-1 in 1955, 5-4 in 1956, 4-5-1 in 1957, and 5-5 in 1958 – which adds up 19-18-2 for his career. His individual records are not included in the team’s football media guide. John must have done something right as a senior, because he was a first team Little All-American selection in the backfield.

One game, though, was enough to cement his reputation. It happened on November 8, 1958, when the Mocs played the University of Tennessee. The Volunteers generally had



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dominated the in-state rivalry in the previous half-century (with only one previous loss), but this game was different. Green led the Mocs to a pair of touchdowns and a 14-6 win. He also had an interception and did the punting. It is still remembered as one of the worst losses in the history of Tennessee football.

“We were a solid football team and during my four years we beat Memphis State three times, plus Southern Mississippi, Tennessee Tech, Middle Tennessee State, Tampa, North Texas and Furman,” Green said to *The Chattanooga* years later.

After the game, some Chattanooga fans headed for the field to take down the goal posts in celebration. A fight broke out, which led to something of a riot. Police threw tear gas at the fans, and hoses were later used to soak the crowd. It took 90 minutes to quiet everything down. In the days after, administrators and authorities took turns criticizing those involved in the incident. By the way, Tennessee won every game in the rivalry through 1969, when it was discontinued for several decades.

But they always had 1958 – the year of the best moment in the school’s football history. “It was a great win for the football team, but it was a real upper for the university as a whole. That victory carried the school for a long time,” said Scrapy Moore Jr., the son of the team’s coach.

Green eventually graduated in 1959, and in the meantime a few NFL teams had taken a bit of a look at him. He had thrown for more than 2,500 yards and 18 touchdowns for the Mocs. Now it was time for John to sit and wait to see if a team would take him. The quarterback didn’t go in the first four rounds, which took place on Dec. 1, 1958. That meant he had to wait for the other 26 rounds, which happened on Jan. 21, 1959. The Steelers took him in the 21<sup>st</sup> round, No. 246 overall. Pittsburgh had one of the most unusual draft classes in history that season, as they traded their first seven picks for assorted veterans such as Earl Morrall, Bobby Layne, Jimmy Orr, Billy Ray Smith, and Tank Younger.

Green took a look at the Pittsburgh roster and saw Layne and Len Dawson at quarterback. He would have had a tough time beating out two Hall of Famers for playing time, so the 6-foot-3, 198-pound rookie headed to Toronto to play for the Argonauts of the Canadian Football League. There were a few names there that would become familiar to fans in the American Football League: Cookie Gilchrist, Wray Carlton, and Al Dorow. Gilchrist made the biggest impression on Green. “In Canadian football the backs can be in motion on every play,” Green recalled. “You’d be calling signals when you’d hear this rumbling behind you. It was Cookie barreling ahead. The quarterbacks handed off like bullfighters. The main idea was to stay out of Cookie’s path.”



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Green saw some relief duty at quarterback for Toronto, going 8 for 20 for 62 yards and three interceptions. The Argos released him at that point, and Green couldn't go back to Pittsburgh right away because of his time in Canada. His season was over.

Green tried his luck again with the Steelers in 1960, and Rudy Bukich had replaced Dawson as the backup quarterback. Coach Buddy Parker cut him at the end of the preseason schedule, saying "You can go to Buffalo (a new team in the AFL), or you can stay with us if you want (and be on the taxi squad), but you're not gonna get to play here." Parker was a friend of Bills' coach Buster Ramsey. The Bills soon cut Bob Brodhead and signed Green.

Ramsey wasted no time getting Green into the lineup, starting him against the Titans on October 16. The newcomer put the Bills ahead early in the fourth quarter with a 32-yard touchdown pass to Elbert Dubenion. "It was kind of a delay pattern," Green told Miller. "He came inside, caught the ball and went all the way across the field and outran everybody." Dubenion had been a 14<sup>th</sup>-round draft pick of the Cleveland Browns in 1959 – seven rounds ahead of Green. However, Dorow drove the Titans down the field for the winning score.

Green and Dubenion became linked for something else, as the quarterback gave his wide receiver a nickname. "Man can't catch, but he's got those golden wheels," Green said about Dubenion. "Golden Wheels" stuck forever.

A week later, Green played like he was much more comfortable. He threw four touchdowns – three to Carlton - and ran for another in a 38-9 win in Oakland. That earned him AFL Offensive Player of the Week honors. On October 30, the Bills knocked off the Oilers – future AFL champions – by a 25-24 score as Green threw for 339 yards and two touchdowns. "We found out early that they couldn't cover a screen pass. We screened them to death," Green said.

Green and Tommy O'Connell split the quarterbacking chores the rest of the season. Neither could ever get a firm hold on the job. Green completed less than 40 percent of his passes, but did throw 10 touchdowns and went 3-3 as a starter. The Bills finished the season 5-8-1.

O'Connell retired during the offseason before the 1961 campaign, giving Green a clear shot at the starting job. Tom had the chance to play in one of the oddest games in Bills' history – a preseason matchup with the CFL's Hamilton Tiger-Cats, scoring a touchdown in a 38-21 loss. However, he separated his shoulder on August 22 and was out indefinitely. "They were making us do some running after practice, catching passes," Green told Miller. "I think Wray threw the ball over my head. I was slowing down and



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tripped and fell on my shoulder. I didn't roll out of it very well, got up, and my shoulder was broken." O'Connell was convinced to end his retirement as an emergency replacement.

O'Connell and Richie Lucas saw time at quarterback early in the season. Neither was effective, so M.C. Reynolds was signed as a free agent. He had a couple of moments, but not enough of them to stop the Bills from signing rookie Warren Rabb. The newcomer also helped the Bills rally to beat Houston on Oct. 8, and had a couple of more good efforts after that before slumping.

By Nov. 5, Green was ready to play again – and threw for 244 yards in a loss to the Raiders. "We should have won that game by two or three touchdowns. I threw a couple of interceptions that hurt bad," Green told Miller. Green saw a majority of the playing time the rest of the way, finishing with a 28-10 loss to the Chargers. Johnny suffered a broken finger and strained knee ligaments in the game, as San Diego took advantage of an inexperienced line to pound Green.

The Bills finished the season 6-8, and owner Ralph Wilson decided it was time for a coaching change as Ramsey was dismissed. "I could understand why they did it, but I didn't like it," Green told Miller. "I was grateful to Buster for letting me play. ... And we did well to start with – that helped his attitude a lot." Lou Saban came in to coach the team, and everyone wondered what might be ahead at the quarterback position.

Saban went right to work. Reynolds was sent to the Raiders in early July. Then on August 16, Green and defensive back Billy Atkins were traded to the Titans for quarterback Al Dorow. Green soon discovered that life with the Titans was even less settled than it was with the Bills. Consider that he was cut from the squad only two games into the season. But Green returned to the roster before Week Seven when Lee Grosscup was too injured to play.

The third-year AFL quarterback started in eight of 14 games in 1962, compiling a 3-5 record. On October 22, he threw two touchdowns to Don Maynard in a win over the Chargers. A little less than a month later, paychecks started bouncing and the Titans' players needed a personal guarantee from coach Bulldog Turner that they would be paid before taking the field. The league eventually took over the Titans so that they could finish the season. In New York's next game on November 22, Green threw for five TDs in a wacky 46-45 win over the Broncos. The fifth scoring pass went to Art Powell and put the Titans ahead for good with three minutes left. The Titans had blown a 17-0 lead and fell behind by 45-32, only to rally for the win.



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The bizarre incidents kept coming throughout the season, and not only because the team's ownership had run out of money. Bill Mathis remembers one play involving Green that year. "Green would be calling signals," Mathis said to New York Times columnist Dave Anderson, "and Bob Mischak, the left guard, would turn around and argue with him."

The team's last game under that name was played on December 15, a 44-10 loss to the Houston Oilers in the Polo Grounds before 3,828. Green and Grosscup were a combined 6 of 28 for 77 yards passing in that game. Both finished the year nursing knee injuries. Butch Songin and Harold "Hayseed" Stevens also played quarterback that season for the Titans, who finished 6-8.

The next time the Titans' name came up, it was in bankruptcy court. The team was purchased by a group of five wealthy men, led by Sonny Werblin, the head of MCA-TV. They hired Weeb Ewbank as head coach and general manager, and renamed the team the Jets. They would have to play one more season in the ancient Polo Grounds before moving to a new Shea Stadium in 1964.

Green and Grosscup more or less divided time at quarterback during the 1963 preseason. However, Ewbank apparently wasn't satisfied with either player. Grosscup didn't make the Opening Day roster, and the Jets claimed Dick Wood from the Chargers off waivers. Wood was immediately named the starter for the season's first game against the Patriots, which turned into a 38-14 loss. Green was 2 of 6 passing for 10 yards in a relief role.

That was it for Green. A week later, Galen Hall – a 1962 member of the Washington Redskins – was the new backup quarterback for the Jets. Since Green never played for New York the rest of the way, we can only assume he was cut at that point. Green's career stat line read this way: Played 30 AFL games, going 275 for 618 for 3,921 yards with 26 touchdowns and 34 interceptions.

Green was smart enough to return to the scene of his greatest triumph – Chattanooga. He was becoming involved in the insurance business, a job in which he could take advantage of his personal popularity. Tom worked at the Associated General Agency until he retired, dealing mostly with trucking companies. Green apparently didn't bring up his football exploits immediately, but you'd have to guess that his name alone no doubt got him in the front door for a great many sales over the years.

Those who didn't know about Green soon learned about him. One time in the early 1990s when his son was playing high school golf, someone came up to Green and said, "Did you used to be someone famous?" He could have sent that person to the UT-Chattanooga Athletic Hall of Fame; he was inducted in 1987. Green also was honored by the Greater



Chattanooga Sports Hall of Fame, and rated the sixth-greatest player in the college's football history by Ainsworthsports.com.

Sadly, he was diagnosed with ALS in 2014. That obviously caused many problems, but Green handled it with as much grace as possible. "When he started to have limited mobility, I'd drive him around in a cart, pull him right up to the tee box or the green because he could barely walk," golfing partner John Akers recalled to the Chattanooga Free Press. "The last few months he played, he started coughing a lot when he'd take a sip of coffee or something. But as soon as he'd come off the tee box, he'd reach for that coffee, which would lead him to say, 'Don't let my coughing interrupt your tee shot.' I'll forever miss his wit and wisdom on the golf course."

Green hung on for a total of five years, dying at the age of 81 on April 24, 2019. John was married to wife Janice for 59 years. They had a daughter, Cathy, and son, John Jr.

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