



Jack Johnson

This article was written by Budd Bailey

Jack Johnson is a famous name in sports. The catch is that the one who played pro football doesn't come to mind when great athletes are discussed. He's behind the Jack Johnson who was heavyweight champion more than a century ago, and – as younger fans have noticed – he's behind the Jack Johnson who has had a nice career in the National Hockey League. But if these articles teach us anything, it's that anyone who reaches the National Football League is quite special.



HALFBACK JOHN JOHNSON BUFFALO BILLS

John Connell Johnson was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on December 11, 1933. He stayed there throughout his childhood, as his family lived in the Carrick neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Naturally, he went to Carrick High School. That school has had a few people with football connections pass through it. The biggest name is probably Tom Modrak, a former general manager of the Philadelphia Eagles from 1998 to 2001 and was vice president of college scouting for the Buffalo Bills from 2001 to 2011. However, its music tradition might be more impressive. The members of the Skyliners doo-wop musical group went to school there, as did singer and recording artist Phyllis Hyman.

Older brother Bill showed Jack the way in high school. Bill was an excellent football player at Carrick, and went on to play the sport at Penn State. His college career came to a premature end there, as he suffered a severe shoulder injury and had to give up the



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game. Bill's college degree in business came in handy, as he worked for IBM for several years and started his own company in the computer field before retiring at the age of 80.

Johnson played running back for the Raiders during his time in high school. He was good enough during that time to be named to the Pittsburgh City League Hall of Fame in 2016. His outstanding play led him to be recruited by the University of Miami, and he headed to Florida after graduating from high school in 1953.

Andy Gustafson was the head coach of the Hurricanes when Jack arrived on campus. Gustafson had an odd coaching career, as he led VPI from 1926 to 1929. But he didn't work as a head coach again until 1948, a gap of almost 20 years. During that time Gustafson was an assistant with Pittsburgh, Dartmouth, and Army. He led the 'Canes to bowl games in 1950 and 1951, but the team was a bit down when Johnson showed up as a freshman. Miami went 4-5, its second straight losing season.

The 1954 season was much better. Miami went 8-1, with a one-point loss to Auburn spoiling a perfect season. The team was ranked ninth at the end of the season. It was an odd schedule by modern standards for the Hurricanes, as they played seven of their nine games at home. Miami was 4-1 against ranked teams that season. Johnson was not much of a factor that year, as he did not earn a varsity letter.

The 1955 season was slightly spoiled by a slow start, as Miami lost three of its first four games – all against ranked opponents. But the Hurricanes picked it up from there, winning five straight to go 6-3 overall. One of the highlights of the season was when Notre Dame came to town in the first meeting between the schools. The Orange Bowl was sold out for the October 7 contest; the 75,685 went home disappointed after a 14-0 loss to the Fighting Irish. Johnson moved into the lineup as a regular, and also did the team's punting. He was therefore part of a defense that only allowed a total of 32 points in those last five games.

The 1956 schedule was even more tilted in Miami's favor than the ones in previous years. The 'Canes played eight of their ten games in Burdine Stadium. They opened with a 14-6 win over South Carolina, and moved into the national rankings – and never left the top 20 for the rest of the season. Miami's undefeated season was spoiled by a loss to Pittsburgh in the final game of the season, but the team finished 8-1-1. Miami's best player probably was Don Bosseler, a running back who was a first-team All-America pick and a future first-round draft choice of the Washington Redskins.

Johnson continued his fine play as a senior. It was hard not to notice him, since he averaged more than 50 minutes of playing time per game. On offense, he had eight catches for 98 yards and two touchdowns. Jack was an All-South selection, and was an



honorable mention choice for the Associated Press and United Press International All-America teams. He was invited to play in the Senior Bowl.

By this time, professional football was at least an option for Johnson. In the 1957 draft, the Bears took the 6-foot-3 defensive back with the last pick in the fourth round – No. 49 overall. It was quite a draft class, particularly at the top. Four Hall of Famers – Paul Hornung, Len Dawson, Jim Brown, and Jim Parker – went in the first eight picks. Sonny Jurgensen went to the Eagles in the fourth round – six picks before Johnson. Defensive tackle Henry Jordan went three choices after Johnson.

Several other Hurricanes went that day besides the previously mentioned Bosseler. Defensive back Johnny Bookman went in the eighth round to the Giants. Tackle Charles Hutchings was a ninth-round choice of Pittsburgh. The Steelers took end Phil Bennett in the 19th round. Hutchings and Bennett never played pro football.

Johnson had a choice of football destinations that season. The Toronto Argonauts went after him hard, but couldn't sign him. The Bears beat them out. After Jack played in the annual College All-Star Game in Chicago, he reported to the Bears' training camp as they got ready for the 1957 season.

The Bears were coached by Paddy Driscoll then, and were coming off a great season in 1956. They were 9-2-1, falling to the Giants in the NFL Championship game. However, 1957 wasn't such a memorable year. Chicago fell to 5-7 to fall to fifth in the division. Running back Rick Casares led the way on offense, while Doug Atkins and Bill George were the defensive leaders.

Johnson played in 11 of 12 games that season. One interesting statistic is that he had more interceptions than starts in 1957 (4 to 3). Game-by-game results are not available, but it seems clear that Johnson took advantage of his relatively limited playing time. He also did a little punting for Chicago that season.

Bears owner and general manager George Halas wasn't happy about the way the team played in 1957. Therefore, he got rid of Driscoll and named himself as the head coach. Ed Brown bounced back at quarterback, and Casares and Willie Galimore were a good one-two running combination. Johnson had a similar season in terms of playing time as a sophomore pro as he did as a rookie in 1957. He played in all 12 games as a defensive back but only had one interception.

It's tough to tell what happened to Johnson in 1959, but his role changed a bit. He took a starting spot at safety next to Richie Petitbon, and played six games there. Jack had one interception. It is easy to guess that he suffered an injury at some point and had to sit out



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a substantial share of the season. The Bears were good at 8-4, but not good enough to unseat the powerful Baltimore Colts.

In 1960, the National Football League expanded by one team, as the Dallas Cowboys entered the league. The usual expansion draft was held before the season, and the Bears lost three players. One of them was Johnson. The other two losses were halfback Pete Johnson and defensive tackle Don Healy. He reported to the Cowboys under coach Tom Landry, but didn't make it to the regular season. Dallas cut the defensive back. That might have been it for his football career, but football players were in demand because of the birth of the American Football League. The Buffalo Bills signed Johnson on September 21, 1960.

Unluckily for Johnson, the Bills had a decent group of secondary members in their first season. Richie McCabe, Billy Atkins, Jim Wagstaff, and Billy Kinard combined for 19 interceptions. Johnson squeezed out a couple of starts for coach Buster Ramsey. Jack had an interception in the Bills' third game against Boston on September 23, and another one against Denver on November 27. The Bills finished 5-8-1.

The Buffalo secondary suffered a run of injuries in 1961. For a while, Johnson was one of the few men left standing. But he only had the chance to play in three games that season for the Bills. Then he was off to Dallas to play for the Texans – probably on waivers. Johnson only played in one game there. Oddly, both the Bills and Texans finished 6-8 that season. And that was it. Johnson played in 45 games in his pro career, finishing with a respectable total under the circumstances of six interceptions.

Jack got married to the former Eileen Novak on May 16, 1962 in Broward County, Florida. They had two children, Britt, and Kyle. Otherwise, nothing could be found about Johnson's life after football until an obituary appeared in the Chicago Tribune. There was no background found in searches about an alleged nickname he picked up along the way, "High Stepper." He died on October 18, 2015 in Evanston, Illinois. The cause of death was listed as "dementia and early stage Alzheimer's."



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