

## **JIMMY JOHNSON: CORNERBACK**

By Don Smith

Jimmy Johnson excelled for the last 13 years of his 16- season career with the San Francisco 49ers as perhaps the premier cornerback of the National Football League. The soft-spoken defender did his job with such ease and efficiency that opposition quarterbacks simply stopped throwing into his defensive area.

Johnson had such a determination to quietly play the game and let his actions speak for themselves that sports writers and his fellow NFL players tended to forget his name when it came time to name all-pro teams and select players for the annual Pro Bowl.

The 6-2, 187-pound UCLA graduate wasn't named all-pro for the first time until his ninth season in 1969 and wasn't selected to play in his first Pro Bowl until after his 10th campaign in 1970.

San Francisco enthusiasts today will insist that his latest honor, election into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, was also too long in coming. For years, his voting support was strong enough to keep him on the ballot and in January, 1994, Johnson's long wait ended with his election to the Hall in his 14th season of eligibility.

In his 16-year NFL career, Johnson intercepted 47 passes which he returned 615 yards, both 49ers records which since have been broken only by Ronnie Lott. The inclination of opposing quarterbacks to throw away from Johnson undoubtedly kept his interception totals from soaring high. As a result, Johnson was the 49ers' top interceptor only once in his 16 years.

While Johnson did not rack up huge interception totals, he did have at least one interception in 14 straight seasons, which tied him with Willie Brown of the Oakland Raiders for an NFL record. Without his one season of offense in 1962, Jim most likely would have held the record by himself.

Born in Dallas, Texas, on March 31, 1938, Johnson and his family that included two brothers -- one was the fabled Rafer Johnson, the 1960 Olympic decathlon champion -- and two sisters migrated to Kingsburg, California, when he was young. When it came time for high school in Kingsburg, Jim was captain of his school's football, basketball and baseball teams.

Johnson played wingback and defensive back while earning three varsity football letters at UCLA and one at Santa Monica City College. He was a big-play threat either as a rusher or a receiver and was named UCLA's best blocker and tackler. An honor student his junior and senior years, Johnson also was an outstanding track man at UCLA with a 13.9 time in the high hurdles and a 25-foot broad jump to his credit.

The 49ers had three first-round draft picks in 1961 and they took Johnson with their first pick. The 49ers envisioned that this blazing-fast rookie could be the answer to some of their offensive problems. Their plans changed quickly, however, when Johnson suffered a dislocated wrist practicing for the College All-Star game in Chicago.

Although Jim continued to play with a cast on his hand, he couldn't catch a football so he was moved to safety for his NFL debut. He enjoyed a sensational rookie season with five interceptions, second most on the 49ers and returned them 116 yards. He also impressed his coaches with his hard tackling.

The 49ers' plans for Johnson as a wide receiver had only been put on hold, however. So in 1962, he was on the offensive unit. Although hampered by injuries part of the season, he became the 49ers second leading pass catcher with 34 receptions for 627 yards and four touchdowns. His 18.4-yard average per catch was the best on the team.

In a 34-17 win over the Chicago Bears that season, Johnson scored the deciding touchdown on an 80-yard pass from John Brodie. At the time, it was the longest scoring reception in 49ers history. The same year against Detroit, he racked up 181 yards on 11 receptions.

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Johnson began the 1963 campaign as a wide receiver but was shifted back to safety in the fourth week of the season. The next year in 1964, he was moved again, this time to the left cornerback position where he played with distinction for the next 13 seasons.

Sometimes known as "the lonesome cornerback," Johnson was a calculating defender who rarely made a mistake. He described his temperament as a "little non-aggressive." Other defensive backs often tried to intimidate receivers with elbow smashes and judo chops. That style of play might produce more interceptions but also more mistakes. Johnson was content to play his style which essentially was to avoid the critical errors that leave a receiver open for a big-yardage gain that could win a game for the opposition.

"Therefore, as the years went by, teams would try to trick me," Johnson remembers. "They'd bait me with certain patterns, work on me with decoys with the idea of eventually setting me up for the bomb."

While casual followers of pro football in the 1960s may not have been aware of Johnson's abilities, the coaches who worked with him as a rookie in San Francisco had no doubt about his future greatness.

"He's a real good one. Mark my words. He'll be around for awhile," Jack Christiansen, also a future Hall of Famer but in 1961 a 49ers assistant coach, said. "He has the three requirements. Tremendous speed, great reflexes, and the willingness to tackle with authority."

Once he moved to cornerback on a permanent basis in his fourth season, Johnson quickly gained the attention of another part of the football family, the quarterbacks. One after another, they paid the sleek defender the ultimate compliment by simply passing to the opposite side of the field most of the time.

Coaches, 49ers teammates and opposition receivers alike praised Johnson frequently.

"Jim doesn't receive much publicity because the opposition avoids him as much as possible," Brodie noted. "Talk to veteran quarterbacks like John Unitas and Bart Starr and they'll tell you they call few pass patterns in Jimmy's area. The only reason Johnson doesn't lead the league in interceptions is he doesn't get the chance."

Dick Nolan, the 49ers head coach from 1968 to 1975, was a big Johnson fan. "I coached three defensive backs I felt were great, Mel Renfro and Cornell Green with the Dallas Cowboys and Johnson," he said. "Jimmy is the best I've ever seen."

One of Johnson's 49ers defensive backfield teammates, Kermit Alexander, was equally laudatory. "He's one of the most phenomenal athletes I've ever seen," Alexander, who played one season with Johnson at UCLA and seven years as a co-starter with the 49ers, said. "There are so many things he can do. He's an extremely controlled person and very, very talented. In the whole time we played together, I never saw him lose his cool, on or off the field. The reason his honors were so late in coming was that he never beat the drums for himself."

"I feel Jim is one of the best corners in pro football," Fred Biletnikoff, the Oakland Raiders top receiver, said. "I just hope he makes a mistake of some sort so I can get an advantage. He covers all the pass patterns so well."

If opposing receivers respect Johnson, so too did Jimmy respect the opponents he faced each week. "I don't look at someone and think that he can't beat me," he said. "If you play long enough, you're going to get beat. The question and the key to your effectiveness is how often."

Johnson was a team leader by his actions, not his words and by a tremendous sense of humor that kept his teammates loose. Coach Nolan had a strict dress code -- nobody got on the plane without a coat and tie -- no exceptions.

One day as the 49ers boarded the bus to leave for the airport, Johnson showed up with a coat and with a tie around his neck and wearing shorts, nothing else.

When Nolan protested, Johnson responded: "Coach, you only said coat and tie"

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In spite of that playful act of insubordination, Nolan respected his premier cornerback as a team leader of some magnitude. "He is the kind of individual who can get along with anybody, a leader in many ways," the coach pointed out. "His leadership was very evident in the 1974 player strike. He kept things from getting out of hand. He's a guy of few words. He doesn't say much, but when he does, everybody listens."

"Whenever the team wanted something, they'd send Jim to see me," Nolan continued. "If it was foolish, he wouldn't bother with it. But if he came to me, I knew it was doggone important."

In both 1970 and 1971, the 49ers advanced to the NFC championship game against the Dallas Cowboys. With the improvement of the 49ers from a non-winner to a championship contender, individual honors at last began to come for Johnson.

He was an all-pro choice of the Pro Football Writers of America in 1970, 1971 and 1972 and an All-NFC pick by the major wire services the same three years. He was voted a Pro Bowl berth after each of those seasons. He was also picked for the Pro Bowl after the 1969 and 1975 seasons but had to miss both games because of injuries.

Johnson also was a two-time winner of the Len Eshmont Award given by 49ers players to the teammate who best displayed the inspirational courage of the late Len Eshmont, a 49er from earlier years.

Another honor -- the George Halas Award for courageous play -- was accorded to Johnson in 1971, a year when he excelled in spite of a broken wrist suffered against the New Orleans Saints.

Johnson's willingness and ability to play with pain was never better demonstrated than in that 1971 campaign. As it was throughout his career, the 49ers allowed Jimmy to make his own decisions whether to play or not to play. The 49ers had counted Jim out of the next week's game, a crucial clash with the Los Angeles Rams. But by week's end, he was fitted with a smaller plastic cast and he played the entire game. He played the rest of the season with the cast and got by with one-handed tackles and even an interception a few weeks later.

Through the rest of the season, some of the game's elite quarterbacks -- Roman Gabriel, Joe Namath, Len Dawson -- tested the injured Johnson's capabilities ... and all failed.

While he was constantly battling injuries, Johnson fought off most of them, as he demonstrated so well in 1971. He missed only 12 games in 16 seasons and wound up playing 212 games, most ever by a San Francisco 49er.

"Obviously, there is luck involved," Johnson said when asked about his ability to continue playing for so long. "I never had a serious knee injury and I was able to maintain my speed and agility. Also I am active in the off-season, playing racquetball, handball, tennis or pickup basketball games. I'm never completely out of shape."

Johnson planned to retire after his 15th season in 1975 but when his high school teammate and good friend Monte Clark got the 49ers head coaching job in 1976, Jimmy agreed to play one more season as a personal favor.

Even at age 38, when most NFL players have long since hung up their spikes, Johnson was willing to adjust to the desires of his coach. "One of my first moves was to change our coverage to mostly zone," Clark said. "It was amazing to see Jim accept the challenge after being a man-for-man defender most of his career. He enjoyed it -- like a rookie. And it was great having him around the young players -- he helped them on the field and I just hope they learned something about his approach to the game -- his concentration."

Johnson did receive much publicity about playing such a demanding position at the age of 38 in what would be his final NFL season and this rankled him. "People overplay the point of my age. Age doesn't play a major part in what a person can do. I think I can still cover any receiver in the league. When I get a group of receivers who can prove to me that I don't have the speed, agility or quickness to cover them, then I'll have to stop."

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Johnson's intensity and determination on the football field no doubt could be attributed to the success of his older brother, Rafer. "I've got another brother who dropped out of sports because he got tired of having people tell him to follow in Rafer's footsteps," Jim related. "They gave me the same jazz. I didn't like it either, but instead of letting it bug me, I decided to accept it as a challenge to see if I could make it on my own in sports."

With his election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Jimmy Johnson, if he ever had any doubts, now can be assured that "making it on my own in sports" was a challenge he faced and conquered with flying colors.

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### JAMES EARL JOHNSON

DB 6-02 187

Santa Monica City College, U.C.L.A.

Born: 03/31/38, Dallas, TX

#### JIMMY JOHNSON'S PASS INTERCEPTIONS

YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	NO	YDS	AVG	TD
1961	SF	N	12	5	116	23.2	0
1962	SF	N	12	-	-	-	-
1963	SF	N	13	2	36	18.0	0
1964	SF	N	14	3	65	21.7	0
1965	SF	N	14	6	47	7.8	0
1966	SF	N	14	4	57	14.3	1
1967	SF	N	11	2	68	34.0	0
1968	SF	N	13	1	25	25.0	0
1970	SF	N	14	2	36	18.0	1
1971	SF	N	14	3	16	5.3	0
1972	SF	N	14	4	18	4.5	0
1973	SF	N	13	4	16	11.5	0
1974	SF	N	12	3	50	16.7	0
1975	SF	N	14	2	0	0.0	0
1976	SF	N	14	1	17	17.0	0
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16 yrs			212	47	615	13.1	2