



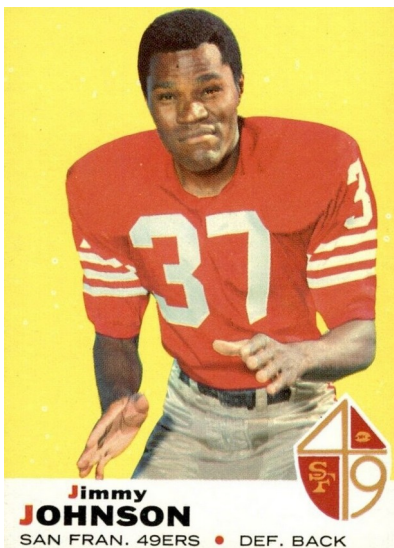
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Jimmy Johnson

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Jimmy Johnson seemed to get the best of both sides of the ball in his 16 NFL seasons (1961 to 1976) with the San Francisco 49ers. Starting as a defensive back in 1961, he hauled in five interceptions as a rookie prior to switching to receiver the next season. In seven starts, he hauled in 34 passes for 627 yards and four touchdowns, averaging 18.4 yards per touch.¹ Johnson posted a remarkable 80-yard game-winning touchdown reception from John Brodie against the Chicago Bears. The play broke a 27-27 tie, leading to a 49ers victory. Three weeks later in a loss to the Detroit Lions Johnson caught 11 passes for 181 yards, leading all receivers.² He returned to the defensive backfield in 1963 where he morphed into one the game's most feared man-to-man defenders. What set him apart from others was his dedication to the team. His unselfish attitude was not only observed by his teammates, but also by his family. Jimmy's older brother Rafer Johnson, the 1960 world decathlon champion, said of his dedication, "Jim Johnson was, in fact, the best that he could be. Jimmy is a quiet man, but he played with determination and commitment. He won the George Halas Award for his courageous play and at all times lead by example."³



Johnson was named to an All-Pro team in five distinct seasons (1965, 1966, 1970-1972) and was also a five time Pro Bowl (1969-1972; 1974) honoree. From 1970 thru 1972, he was a consensus first-team All-Pro and first-team all-conference choice by major selectors such as the Associated Press, *Pro Football Weekly*, *Newspaper Ent. Association*, and the Pro Football Writers Association.⁴ His 47 career interceptions



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ranked 13th at the time of his retirement and still ranks in the top 50 today.⁵ He likely would have picked off more passes but opposing quarterbacks were reluctant to throw in his direction. Former teammate and MVP Brodie once said, “Jim doesn't receive much publicity because the opposition avoids him as much as possible. 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.”⁶ An example is in Johnson's 16 seasons, he led the team just once in interceptions.

San Francisco did not enjoy much success in the 1960s, never finishing higher than third place in the NFL Western Division. Head coaches Red Hickey (1960 to 1963) and Jack Christensen (1963 to 1967) did not lead the team for more than four full seasons before being replaced. Dick Nolan brought the team success, though not until his third season in 1970. The 49ers won 10 regular season games for the first time since moving to the NFL, capturing the Western Division title.⁷ Johnson tied for second on the team with two interceptions, one of which he ran back 36 yards for a touchdown. Teammate Bruce Taylor who started opposite Johnson at cornerback, won the Associated Press Defensive Rookie of the Year award. Taylor led the team with three interceptions.⁸ After a hard-fought, 17-14 win over the Minnesota Vikings in the Divisional round of the playoffs, the 49ers fell to the Dallas Cowboys, 17-10, in the NFC Championship Game.⁹ Losses to the Cowboys in the playoffs would be a trend for the club over the next two seasons. Dallas beat San Francisco in the Conference Championship in 1971 and in the Divisional round in 1972.

- 1 “Jimmy Johnson,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 28, 2023, [Jimmy Johnson Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 “Jimmy Johnson,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 28, 2023, [Jimmy Johnson Career Touchdown Log | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 3 “Jimmy Johnson,” Profootballhof.com, accessed May 28, 2023, [Jimmy Johnson | Pro Football Hall of Fame \(profootballhof.com\)](#).
- 4 “Jimmy Johnson,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 28, 2023, [Jimmy Johnson Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 5 “NFL Career Interceptions Leaders Through 1976,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 28, 2023, [NFL Career Interceptions Leaders Through 1976 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 6 Stanley, Logan. “San Francisco 49ers: 10 best cornerbacks in franchise history,” ninernoise.com, June 11, 2017, [San Francisco 49ers: 10 best cornerbacks in franchise history \(ninernoise.com\)](#).
- 7 “San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 28, 2023, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 8 “Bruce Taylor,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 28, 2023, [Bruce Taylor Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 9 “1970 San Francisco 49ers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 28, 2023, [1970 San Francisco 49ers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).



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Despite the hard luck in the playoffs, the 49ers defense stiffened, ranking in the top 10 in points allowed.¹⁰ Johnson played with two future Hall of Famers on defense: linebacker Dave Wilcox and defensive tackle Leo Nomellini. Wilcox was a four-time All-Pro, while Nomellini made nine All-Pro teams and 10 Pro Bowl appearances. In the defensive secondary, several of Johnson's teammates made the Pro Bowl at least once: Jerry Mertens, Abe Woodson, Bruce Taylor, and Kermit Alexander.

Johnson planned on retiring following the 1975 season, but head coach Monte Clark convinced him to stick around for one more year that turned into an 8-6 campaign, securing a second place finish in the NFC West Division.¹¹

For his career, Johnson appeared in 213 games, making 205 starts, most for any defensive player in franchise history. His 213 games played trails only Jerry Rice, who played in 238. His 47 career interceptions ranks second in team history behind Ronnie Lott's 51.¹²

Johnson earned a variety of awards and accolades that include the George Halas Award (1972), given to the individual who overcomes the greatest adversity to succeed. Johnson received football's greatest honor in 1994 when he was enshrined into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Rafer Johnson showed utmost happiness for his brother saying, "Jim and I often shared his dream. We often talked about his dream as we grew up and thought about what great tomorrow would bring. It was simple: He wanted to play his game to the best of his ability."¹³ Johnson was also chosen to the NFL 1970s All-Decade Team as the top cornerback.

Born on March 31, 1938 in Dallas, Texas as James Earl Johnson, his family moved to Kingsburg, California during his youth. He had a trim stature at 6'2" 185 pounds and was blessed with breakaway speed. It was not surprising that he followed in his brother's footsteps as a track and field athlete at Kingsburg High School.¹⁴ Rivaling his accomplishments, Johnson broke his brother's record for the long jump and equaled his time in the high hurdles. Johnson also found a niche on the football team. UCLA recruited him for football, but he wanted to stick with track as well. Thus, Johnson went elsewhere, spending one year at Santa Monica Junior College.¹⁵

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- 1 0 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 28, 2023, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
 - 1 1 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 28, 2023, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
 - 1 2 "Jimmy Johnson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 28, 2023, [Jimmy Johnson Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
 - 1 3 "Jimmy Johnson," Profootballhof.com, accessed May 28, 2023, [Jimmy Johnson | Pro Football Hall of Fame \(profootballhof.com\)](#).



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UCLA gave in to his wishes, allowing him to participate in track during the spring and football in the fall. The Bruins were led by future NFL quarterback Billy Kilmer on offense, who ranked in the top 5 in total offense in school history. Kilmer was also inducted to the College Football Hall of Fame in 1999.¹⁶ Johnson played halfback and end on offense and defensive back on defense due to his tremendous speed and versatility. He was a two-time NCAA high hurdles champion in track and averaged over 6.0 yards per carry in football in 1959. As a senior in 1960, he averaged 12.3 yards per play. His 432 yards from scrimmage was second on the team.¹⁷

His NFL career began when the 49ers selected him sixth overall in the 1961 NFL Draft. Johnson recalls, “I was drafted as a wide receiver, but I played five or six positions in my early years. I was a running back, cornerback, safety, receiver. I played them all. I finally asked coach Jack Christensen if I could just play one position. He let me take my choice.”¹⁸ Johnson settled on cornerback. The nature of being left on an island in the secondary never bothered him. Matching up against the opposing receivers he said, “I don’t look at someone and think he can’t beat me. If you play long enough, you’re going to get beat. The question and the key to your effectiveness is how often.”¹⁹ His key was to focus on the opponent’s midsection, “I never paid attention to the receivers head or shoulder fakes. I concentrated on his midsection. I knew whatever way that went, he would go, too. That way I could react to his final move. I never looked at the receiver as tough, just someone I had to short circuit.”²⁰ Johnson never panicked saying, “If he had a step on you, then all you could do was hope for help or that defensive lineman would cause a bad throw. The toughest quarterback was Fran Tarkenton because he could run or throw.”²¹

Johnson was inducted into the UCLA Athletics Hall of Fame in 1992 and to the Fresno Athletic Hall of Fame in 1978 for his contributions for sports in California.²² With the

1 4 “Johnson, James,” fresnoahof.org, accessed May 28, 2023, [Fresno Athletic Hall of Fame \(fresnoahof.org\)](https://www.fresnoahof.org).

1 5 “Johnson, James,” fresnoahof.org, accessed May 28, 2023, [Fresno Athletic Hall of Fame \(fresnoahof.org\)](https://www.fresnoahof.org).

1 6 “Billy Kilmer,” footballfoundation.org, accessed May 28, 2023, [Billy Kilmer \(1999\) - Hall of Fame - National Football Foundation](https://www.footballfoundation.org).

1 7 “Jim Johnson,” sportsreference.com, accessed May 28, 2023, [Jim Johnson College Stats, School, Draft, Gamelog, Splits | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](https://www.sportsreference.com).

1 8 “Johnson, James,” fresnoahof.org, accessed May 28, 2023, [Fresno Athletic Hall of Fame \(fresnoahof.org\)](https://www.fresnoahof.org).

1 9 “Johnson, James,” fresnoahof.org, accessed May 28, 2023, [Fresno Athletic Hall of Fame \(fresnoahof.org\)](https://www.fresnoahof.org).

2 0 “Johnson, James,” fresnoahof.org, accessed May 28, 2023, [Fresno Athletic Hall of Fame \(fresnoahof.org\)](https://www.fresnoahof.org).

2 1 “Johnson, James,” fresnoahof.org, accessed May 28, 2023, [Fresno Athletic Hall of Fame \(fresnoahof.org\)](https://www.fresnoahof.org).



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49ers, he was a two-time recipient of the Len Eshmont award, granted to the player who exhibits the most spirited play. In 2009, he was one of 17 players and coaches inducted to the San Francisco 49ers Hall of Fame as part of the inaugural class. His number 37 was retired in 1977, one of 12 numbers retired by the franchise.

2 2 “Johnson, James,” fresnoahof.org, accessed May 28, 2023, [Fresno Athletic Hall of Fame \(fresnoahof.org\)](https://www.fresnoahof.org).