



Editor's note: This is the fifth in a series of profiles on the Top 10 athletes in Santa Cruz County history, as voted by Sentinel readers.

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Bio J

JOHNNY JOHNSON often passed Memorial Field during the summer of 1985. And, nearly every time, he saw Chris Lovato working on his passing.

Lovato was preparing for the football season, having just been switched to quarterback.

"He gave up his whole summer," Johnson said. "And it seemed like most of those days, he was the only guy out there. He wanted to do whatever it took to make our

## #6 CENTURY TEAM JOHNNY JOHNSON

team and our senior year the best it could be.

"I just want him to know I respect him for doing that. Without that, I don't think myself or my team could've achieved anything."

Santa Cruz, with only 12 players on the first day of practice and 23 by the season opener, was expected to finish last in the Santa Cruz Coast Athletic League. The Cardinals instead followed Johnson to a 7-2-1 record, the school's first winning season in 17 years.

In perhaps the most dominating season by any football player in Santa Cruz County history, Johnson ran for a still-standing county single-season record of 1,729 yards, despite also starting at linebacker and never coming off the field.

He highlighted an improbable year by leading the Cardinals to a 59-28 victory over eventual league-champion and rival Soquel. Johnson ran for 177 yards on 24 carries, caught two passes for 67 yards, and caught Soquel off guard by throwing five times off the halfback option, completing four for 71 yards.

Johnson ran for three touchdowns, threw for another and was carried off the field on the shoulders of his teammates.

To this day, that game remains one of Johnson's greatest memories of what became a Pro Bowl career.

Speaking by phone from his new home in Phoenix, Johnson talked about the highs and lows of a career that was cut short by a back injury just when it appeared the best was to come.

After 4,078 yards rushing in five NFL seasons (Phoenix Cardinals, 1990-'92; New York Jets, 1993-'94), Johnson signed with the San Francisco 49ers in 1995 for a reported \$3 million over two years, plus a \$500,000 signing bonus. Coming off a Super Bowl championship, the 49ers lost Ricky Watters to free agency and looked to Johnson as the key figure in their rushing attack.

"I couldn't have asked for anything better," said Johnson, a 6-foot-3, 220 pound halfback. "It was the hometown team, playing in front of family and friends every weekend. With a top team and such a great offense, I feel I would have been able to do some very good things."

But a nagging back injury flared up on the opening day of training camp.

"It started off as a minor pain in my lower back," during his final season with the Jets, Johnson said, but he played through it. This, however, was different. It just got worse.

"It was kind of like a ticking bomb," he said. "And now it's going off and there's nothing you can do to prevent it. It was a golden opportunity, and it was slipping through my fingers."

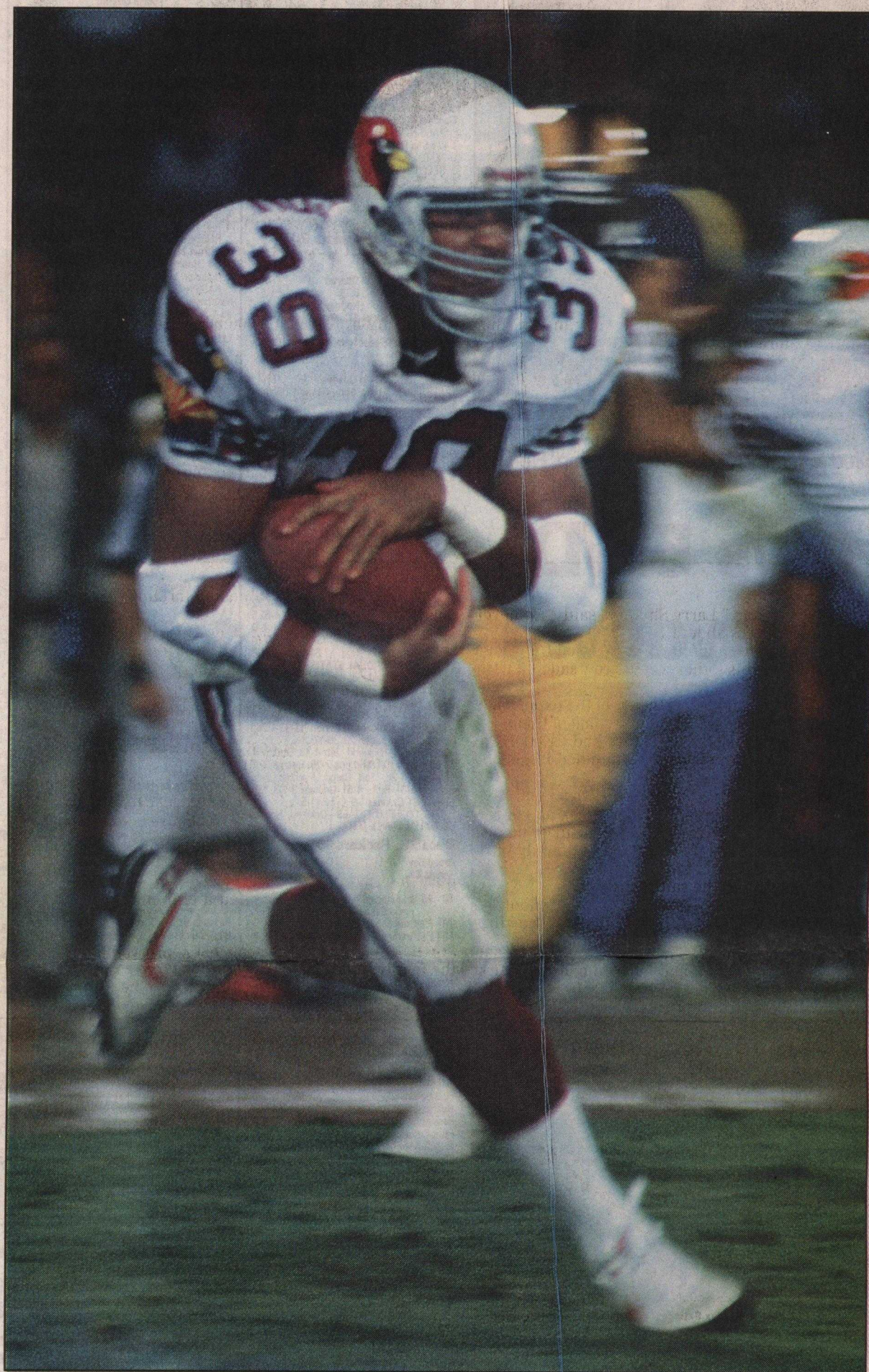
After trying and failing to come back over a period of a month, Johnson realized his career was over when he watched a 49er preseason game from the sidelines and could hardly bear the pain of simply standing for any length of time. Johnson, with three bulging discs in his lower back, was finally waived.

Please see JOHNSON — Page B3

Johnny Johnson's running ability propelled him to stardom ...

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# Like a Rocket

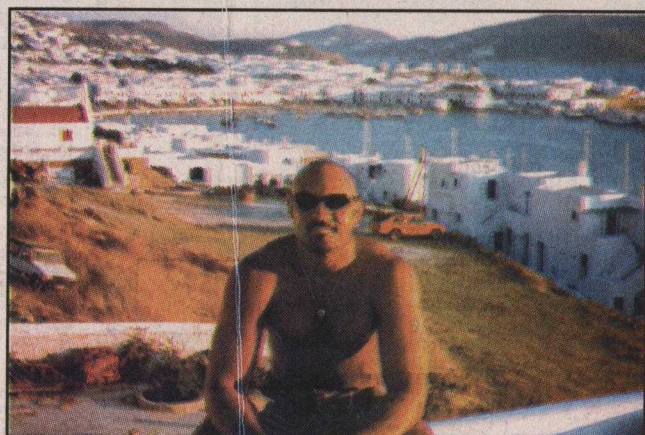


Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

**TOP:** After having his #44 jersey ripped apart during a game with heavily favored Soquel High in October of 1985, Johnny Johnson re-entered the game wearing #84.

**ABOVE:** Johnson was one of the NFL's biggest surprises during his 1990 rookie season for the Phoenix Cardinals.

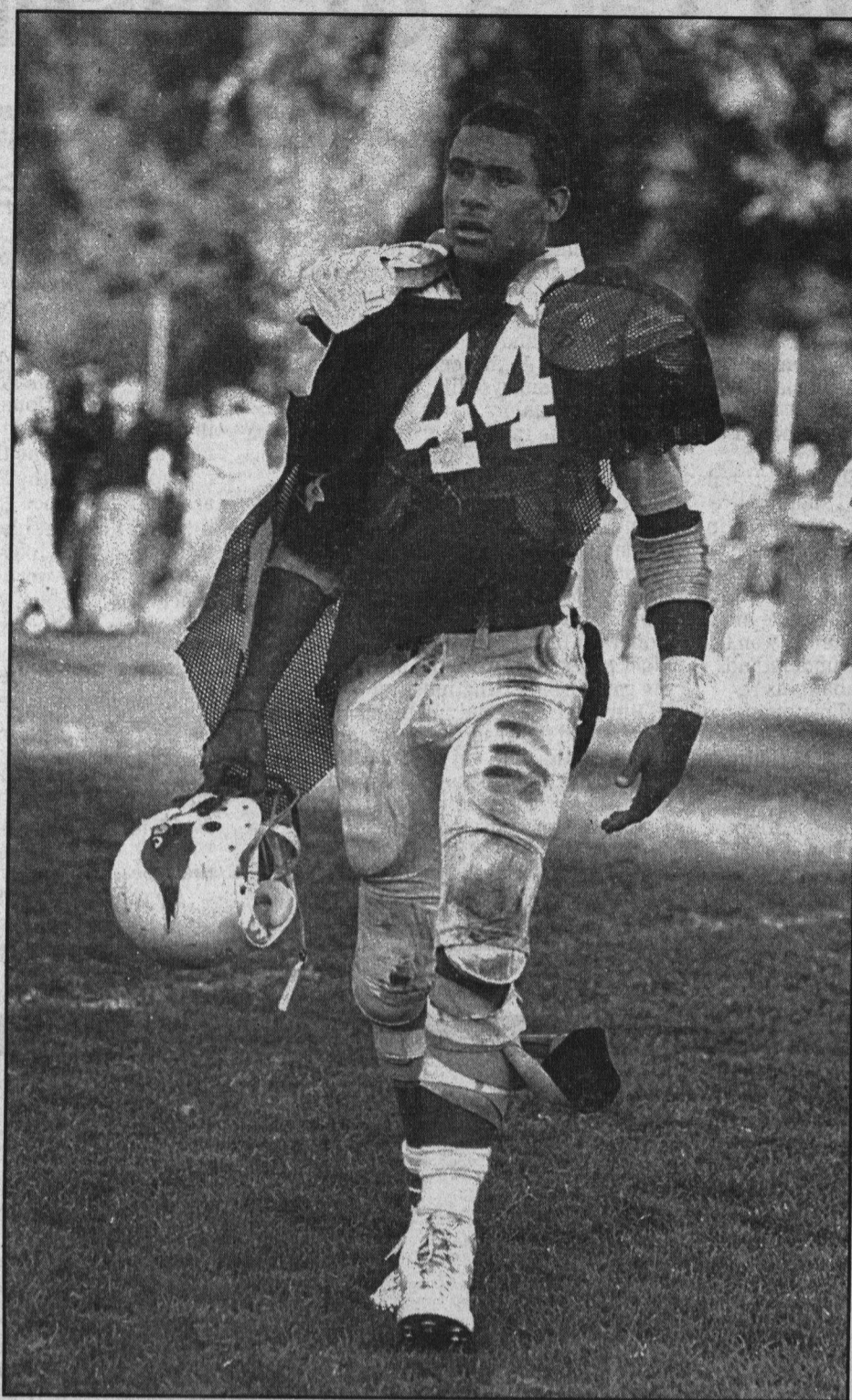
**RIGHT:** Since he left football in 1995, Johnson has traveled around the world. He is pictured earlier this year in Mykonos, Greece.



Special to the Sentinel

Playing on a Santa Cruz High team of only 23 players, Johnny Johnson nearly single-handedly beat heavily favored Soquel High and paid the price for it.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel



## Johnson

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"What made it tough for me was that I still felt I had plenty of good years left," Johnson said. "I didn't go 10-plus years, but I went longer than the average. I went five years. And it was a great five years."

The injury continues to prevent him from even playing pickup basketball. But Johnson, 31, has found other pursuits. He's single and lives with his 16-year-old dog Sammi, and spends most of his time traveling, mostly to warm-weather locales such as Hawaii, Jamaica, Mexico and throughout Europe.

He soon will be ready to pursue a second career, though Johnson said he's still unsure of what it will be. One thing's for sure, his first was one of the most spectacular the county has ever seen.

Johnson was born June 11, 1968, to Kathy Coburn and Johnny Johnson Sr., a San Jose State rushing standout from 1960-'62. But Johnson hardly knew his father and was raised, along with his older half-brother Kaydon, by his mother on Delaware Street in Santa Cruz.

It was those playground basketball matchups with Kaydon — at the Meter Street, Jade Street, Loudon Nelson, and UC Santa Cruz courts — that did as much as anything to develop Johnny's athletic ability.

"He was one of the best players I ever played against," Johnson said of Kaydon. "He was 6-4, thin, but strong for his size. I was more physical. We used to go out and have some battles to 21."

"Basketball was always my No. 1

### Career Highlights

- Holds Santa Cruz County single-season record of 1,729 rushing yards (1985).
- Set San Jose St. records for rushing yards (1,285) and touchdowns (19) in 1988.
- Named NFL Rookie of the Year and to the Pro Bowl in 1990.

game," Johnson said. "I just saw that football was definitely what I was going to be at the next level."

He averaged double figures in points and rebounds in basketball and could plow through a defense in football as well as run around it. He was described in a Sports Illustrated story as "a strider, with deceiving acceleration and good football sense."

"It was a self-respect thing, to go out and play my best," Johnson said. "It didn't matter whether it was Jade Street or playing the Dallas Cowboys."

And few have done both. Kaydon had incredible talent, but made off-the-field mistakes. Kathy did not want the same thing to happen to Johnny and got him involved in as many extra-curricular activities as possible to keep him out of trouble.

"I want to give thanks to my Mom," he said. "I appreciate all the hard work she did so me and my brother could have what we have. She had to sacrifice a lot so we could have what we needed."

Johnson's progression wasn't smooth, however. He missed his junior year of Santa Cruz High

football because of academic ineligibility, was a Proposition 48 casualty at San Jose State, causing him to lose his freshman season.

And, a year after setting school single-season records for rushing yards (1,285) and touchdowns (19) in 1988, Johnson was dismissed from the Spartans midway through his senior season after a series of run-ins with coach Claude Gilbert.

Johnson, however, said he wouldn't have done anything differently.

"Absolutely not," Johnson said. "The one regret I have was not playing with my teammates my senior year, and not being able to play in any all-star games, like the East-West game."

The dismissal affected his stock, dropping Johnson to a seventh-round selection in the 1990 NFL draft. Despite little chance to make the team, Johnson beat out two players drafted ahead of him, and incumbent Stump Mitchell, for the starting halfback spot. And he made the most of his opportunity, gaining 926 yards on the way to earning Rookie of the Year honors, and more.

"I was called into the office of the general manager, Larry Wilson," Johnson said. "And my first thought was, 'What did I do?' Then he informed me I made the Pro Bowl."

"You play to be respected, and everything's so new, and you're meeting guys you saw on TV. And then you get picked by your peers

"You're one of the best of the best ... incredible."