

Johnson 'going strong' after football collision

By Scott Binder

"The coaches are always nice to me, but I'm not a part anymore. They are busy with other things."

—Randee Johnson

Two years ago, a future overflowing with honors and expectation awaited Randee Johnson. As a 6-2, 202-pound freshman defensive back, Johnson's talents were sought after by Arizona State and most of the Big Eight schools.

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After a fall of freshman football he received just reward for his hard work — a trip to the 1980 Cotton Bowl. Following a winter of heavy lifting, he anxiously awaited April 12, the date of the first spring scrimmage. Rain shelved the scrimmage until April 13, which ironically proved to be Johnson's unlucky day.

Listed as the No. 2 safety on the depth chart, he received a chance to prove himself immediately. The scrimmage began pitting the No. 2 defense against the No. 1 offense.

He excelled in this series and another before his athletic career was ended by a brutal collision. In his third series, coming up from his safety position on a running play, Johnson met ball carrier Craig Johnson (a senior I-back at the time) head on. Although others were involved in the tackle, Randee made the initial contact.

The collision fractured Randee Johnson's fourth cervical vertebra (lower neck) and bruised his spinal cord.

Couldn't move

Although dazed, he remembers, "When I was down, I figured I was paralyzed. There was a tingling feeling all over, like when you hit your elbow. I went to push up and couldn't move."

Johnson said he believes he regained most of the movement on his right side within ten minutes. The initial recovery was quick. He was able to walk 10 days after the accident, despite being anchored by a halo cast that extended from his neck to his waist.

By mid-July, Johnson walked, swam, rode a bike and lifted weights. Since then, the recovery has slowed.

Johnson said his reflexes and movements on the left side remain slow. "My left side is always behind my right." He illustrated by closing both hands into fists. His left hand closed nearly three seconds after his right. This sluggishness of movement prevents Johnson from running.

Johnson said he remains insensitive to temperature or pain on his right side, from the middle of his stomach all the way down his leg.

"I could get burnt or cut pretty badly and not feel it. So far, nothing serious has happened, but it could," he said. "It's odd, there is a line going exactly down the middle of my stomach to my legs. On the left side the movement is slow, on the right side I can hardly feel temperature or pain."

Unsure of how much movement or feeling will return, Johnson says, "I don't think the doctors or anyone really know. Every case is different."

Disregarding superstitious beliefs, he said he does not believe the injury occurring on April 13 had any special significance.

"It is kind of funny though. The number I wore at the Cotton Bowl that year was 13," he said.

As a junior at Lincoln Northeast, Johnson gained prep football all-American status playing quarterback. Two weeks into fall practice of 1979, he switched to safety with the hope of playing sooner.

No hard feelings

Looking back, the highly recruited Johnson wishes he would have visited more universities.

"I wish I wouldn't have committed to Nebraska so early. My final decision would have probably been the same, but I would like to see what the others have to offer now," he said. Other than Nebraska, Johnson visited only Arizona State.

Johnson said he has no hard feelings toward the Nebraska program. "I am thankful for my scholarship which will be honored until graduation," he said.

After the injury, Johnson said he received overwhelm-

ing support from Nebraska football fans.

"I bet I received 1,000 letters. There were more than 20 a day for several weeks after the injury," he said.

At times, Johnson said it has been annoying to him to go over the injury again and again, but he said he is sometimes "kind of glad" to know that people still care about his recovery.

'...but at least I could throw.'

Johnson said he is working out at the weight room adjacent to the training room at the Memorial Stadium. "I quit working out for about a year (most of 1981), but I've been going strong since January," he said.

Last fall, he competed in city league flag football, but said, "It didn't work too well because my left side is slower. I couldn't run, but at least I could throw."

If a miraculous recovery were to occur, Johnson doubts he would play football again.

"It (the injury) made me think twice about competing. At the time I thought football was everything, but you can't depend on sports all your life."

Johnson said he does not really take school more seriously now. "The injury should have turned me around, but it hasn't yet. I study, but I could do better."

"I don't know exactly what field I'm heading into," Johnson said, but he said he is leaning toward a job as a sales representative.

"I'm in no hurry to graduate," he added.

"I'll never know what I could have done. I had goals of starting and possibly being All-Big Eight. Almost everyday, I wonder how well I could have done."

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Weir . . .

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Weir was big for a hurdler but small for a 60-minute-a-game tackle. Weir was 6-½, 190 pounds when he played football at Nebraska. With tackles today weighing up to 300 pounds, it's hard to imagine Weir pounding away for three varsity and three pro seasons.

"I'm heavy-boned," Weir said, trying to explain how he was able to play at 190 pounds. "It was the track work that got me by."

"When I came up as a sophomore, there was five or six senior backs," Weir said. "I had played in the backfield most all of the time in high school and they (the Nebraska coaches) said 'What do you want to do?' and I said 'I'll play anywhere. I don't want to sit on the bench.' I got started in at tackle and never moved."

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