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CHIEFS

Former starter Derrick Johnson stuck on bench

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — Given Derrick Johnson's sweet, humble nature, it's a wonder he ever went out for football, let alone became an All-American linebacker and first-round draft choice.

He speaks softly and smiles warmly and never forgets to call his mom. But he's also 6-foot-3 and 240 pounds of lean, bulging muscle. An unusually gifted athlete, he set an NCAA record his senior season at Texas with nine forced fumbles and won the Bronko Nagurski Trophy as the top defensive player in the land.

But the instant NFL stardom many predicted has not arrived. And if he doesn't win his starting job back, it never will. For about six weeks Johnson's been riding the Kansas City bench, jerked out of the lineup for rea-

sons that have never been made public.

A player with Johnson's talent can't crack the starting lineup for a team that's 1-6? He wouldn't help a defense ranked 30th out of 32 teams?

First-year head coach Todd Haley says he's satisfied that Johnson is working hard. Johnson says he's doing everything he can to get back.

But in the meantime, Demorrio Williams keeps playing well and giving no indication he's ready to return the job to the man who not so long ago was once hailed as the best defensive player in college football.

To keep his emotions flowing in a positive direction, Johnson has called upon friends, family and faith. Still, this isn't easy.

"It stinks," Johnson said. "It stinks to not be starting or not

be playing, or not be playing like I should. Not being out there on the field like I usually am. But it's made my mind stronger."

Chiefs fans, especially those who watched Johnson and the Longhorns beat Kansas his senior season, thought they'd grabbed the next great linebacker when he fell to them in the 2005 draft.

Texas, a school that's produced more than a few good players at his position, had never before had one who totaled 65 tackles for losses.

Johnson was an instant starter with the Chiefs. Yet, plagued by little nagging injuries, he never seemed to fulfill the great expectations so many people had draped around his muscular physique. Some said he was too passive. Some said he lacked that fire in the belly that great

defensive players carry around like business cards.

In Johnson's limited role, he's made plays this year. His interception and 70-yard return against Baltimore remains the outstanding moment the Kansas City defense has had all year.

At 27, he ought to be coming into his prime. Instead, he sits and in a quiet, make-no-waves sort of way, he fumes.

"I should be out there playing. I should be starting, helping this team win," he said. "I've never played second string. I've always been the first guy up. But that's life. You go through stuff sometimes where you don't expect it."

"All I can do is keep working, try to work my way back."

Haley's been known to snap at reporters who ask about Johnson's status. He took a softer

tone on Wednesday.

"I have no problem with how Derrick is preparing, practicing, playing," Haley said. "He's continuing to get himself ready so when the opportunity, or the bigger opportunity, presents itself, he's ready for that. Again, right now, Demorrio Williams is not why we're where we are at. He's played as good a football as anybody on this team."

Johnson, in the meantime, is determined to turn a negative into a positive.

"I don't want to get caught up into the whole 'anger thing,'" he said. "When I first wasn't starting, I was mad. But I'm not a guy who's going to be complaining. I'm just going to go to work."

"This is going to make me a better player. This is going to make me a better person and a better player on the field."

KANSAS STATE FOOTBALL

THE GOAL: BALANCE

Rushing ahead of passing game

By ARNE GREEN
Special to The Herald

MANHATTAN — Bill Snyder wants balance.

It's what he has built his Kansas State offenses on in the past, and nine games into his first season back in charge, it remains the goal.

"We have to become a more balanced football team," he said with preparation under way for Saturday's 11:30 a.m. Big 12 North showdown with rival Kansas at Snyder Family Stadium. "I think that's important to our program, at least in my eyes."

But the fact remains that the Wildcats' bread and butter so far has been a rushing attack that ranks third in the league and 32nd nationally with 182.3 yards a game. They're last in the conference in passing at 175 a game.

Quarterback Grant Gregory, for one, isn't afraid to admit it.

"Overall, I'd call us a run-first team," said

Gregory, who since taking over as the starter for the conference opener has given the Wildcats another ground threat to go with workhorse running back Daniel Thomas.

"That's what we want to do."

"We want to pound the football. We want to run the ball downhill and control the clock."

Perhaps so, but Snyder is looking for more. The fact that the Wildcats (5-4 overall, 3-2 Big 12) found some success through the air last week in a 42-30 loss at Oklahoma was a start.

"I think being able to throw it a little bit, we've moved in that direction," said Snyder, who saw his team pass for 215 yards and run for 149 against an OU defense that ranked sixth nationally. "However, you look at it and a substantial amount of that yardage came from pulling stuff out of the deck, and we threw up a couple

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Block Time



File photo/The Ottawa Herald

Ottawa University sophomore Theresa Harper blocks the ball in a match played earlier this season. Ottawa will play 7 p.m. today in Lindsborg against Bethany College in the regular-season finale. Ottawa, Bethany and Saint Mary are tied for fifth in the conference with 7-10 records.

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- OHS FB vs. St. Thomas
- OHS VB vs. Basehor-Linwood

- OHS volleyball
- AC vs. CH volleyball
- OHS FB vs. Baldwin
- OHS cross-country Inv.
- OHS football vs. Spring Hill

MISSOURI FOOTBALL

Tigers' Smith could join elite linemen

COLUMBIA, Mo. (AP) — The Big 12 has plenty of elite defensive linemen — Nebraska's Ndamukong Suh and Jared Crick and Texas' Sergio Kindle to name a few. It may be time to add Missouri freshman Aldon Smith to the list.

Smith's three sacks of Colorado's Tyler Hansen in the Tigers' 36-17 win last week gave the Raytown, Mo., native eight for the season — the most in the nation for a freshman and just three shy of Justin Smith's (no relation) single-season Missouri record. Smith has four regular-season games remaining to try and get the record, starting Saturday when the Tigers (5-3, 1-3 Big 12) host Baylor (3-5, 0-4).

He also leads all freshmen with 13 tackles for loss. He's third overall among Big 12 defensive linemen with 43 tackles, trailing only Crick and Suh.

Those are impressive numbers for a player who began the season second on the depth chart at defensive end. It wasn't long before he moved into the starting role.

Teammates and coaches have been impressed.

"He's one of the best players around that I've seen at Mizzou," senior captain linebacker Sean Weatherspoon said. "He doesn't know how good he can be, but he'll find out soon that the sky's the limit."

Smith's effort has drawn high praise from coach Gary Pinkel, who compared Smith's ability to adapt to those of two standout offensive players from the recent past.

"He could be in the wrong place at the wrong time and end up where the ball was supposed to be, somehow, someday," Pinkel said. "Brad Smith and J-Mac (Jeremy Maclin) could do that."

Even in the Tigers' 41-7 loss to Texas, Smith managed to turn heads with 11 tackles, four for loss, and two sacks.

At 6-5 and 255 pounds, Smith is the tallest player on the Missouri defense and his unique type of rangy athleticism makes him a menace for opposing offensive lines.

"He's very physically gifted," defensive coordinator Dave Steckel said. "He can run, he's strong, he can change direction. He's the whole package."

Smith has also developed a nose for the big play.

"Earlier in the season I was kind of relying on my athleticism but now I'm actually starting to understand the game a little bit better and starting to have a feel for it," he said. "I've just been watching a lot more film and focusing a lot more on technique."

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