Sandy Johnson—Tech’s Missing Superstar

By BILL CATE
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Sandy Johnson, one of the most highly publicized football players Tech has ever recruited, is not listed in the 1973 brochure. Run your finger down the roster. Sandy Johnson is not there. Look at the depths chart. He is not there either.

Summit school grades are due out soon. Although it is not a certainty, it appears Johnson will not be eligible this fall. If this happened to be just another case of some dummy flunking out, the story would stop here. But it is not.

Sandy Johnson is anything but a dummy, but for some reason he has never been able to make it. Truthfully, he has flunked football, too. And for the same reason.

“It’s a shame,” says one Tech coach. “If he has the talent we think he does, he has a pro career in front of him. But we’ve tried everything—begging him, loving him and weeding him—nothing has seemed to work.”

How do you work on the mind? How do you make a potential superstar want to be better? This is what makes recruiting so difficult.

Yes, it is difficult to understand, but the Tech coach who recruited Johnson, Carl Ellis, says, in this case, there may be an excuse.

Although there is little doubt that Johnson has not been caught up in college football, he has had more than his share of problems.

The day he was to report for practice last year (his freshman year),” says Ellis, his father was found dead, dumped over the steering wheel of a car. Sandy had to handle all the arrangements for the funeral and he was a week late reporting for practice.

Upon arriving at Tech, Johnson was given the customary shot, including a flu shot. He has a bronchial problem, and the flu shot gave him bronchitis.

“It was a breakdown in communications,” Ellis says. “He wasn’t supposed to have the flu shot.”

Sandy missed another week.

Then, upon beginning practice, his arches fell. After correcting that, he suffered an elbow injury. After that, Johnson played over...

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three games on the junior varsity and two on the varsity despite other injuries.

After football season, Sandy got excited, maybe for the first time since his arrival at Tech, about the return of Dan Henning. But during winter-conditioning drills, he suffered a freak knee injury which required an operation. He missed all of spring practice.

By the end of the spring term, Johnson had not recovered from his knee operation, but most of the problem was apparently mental. He registered for summer school, but there is a question of how many classes he actually attended.

If Johnson didn’t have enough problems, his mother and stepfather got a divorce last spring and, according to people close to the situation, there was considerable pressure on Sandy to choose sides.

"On the kid’s behalf," says Ellis, "if there is such a thing as an excuse, he’s possibly got one."

Ellis says there is the possibility that too much was expected.

"If I had to do it all over again," he says, "there is one thing I would change. As old and as experienced as I am, I expected him to run for a touchdown every time he got his hands on the ball. I know that’s impossible, but I actually expected it. I just had that feeling he was going for a score every time. But he isn’t Plastic Man or Green Lantern. I just expected more of him than I did the other players coming in."

Dan Henning, who would have coached Johnson this year, says he feels it is the case of a big fish in a small pond becoming a small fish in a big pond.

"Coming from a small school in a small league (Jonesboro, Tenn. High), it is sometimes very difficult being just another player," Henning says. "Maybe that’s what happened to Sandy. You have to be patient in a situation like that. You can’t work your way to the top again in one year."

"He has unlimited potential. Even if he can’t play for us this year, I think he’ll recycle. He’ll get straightened out and he’ll play well here or somewhere else eventually."

Ellis says Johnson is the most optimistic person he has ever seen.

"I would go to him with what I considered to be a critical situation," Ellis said, "and before I got the problem explained he had me as happy as a lark."

"There was some problem with registration for summer school and I went running over to talk to Sandy about it. He assured me that everything was all right, that he understood the task at hand and that he was happy. Well, he made things sound good. I just went home and ate my tuna fish sandwich, but I see now things weren’t all right. I’ve just never seen such an optimist. He doesn’t have a negative bone in his body."

Apparently, Ellis’ analysis is correct.

"I’m just waiting on my grades to come in from summer school," Johnson said from his home in Jonesboro. "I think I did pretty well in the last session."

"Well, what would you do if you didn’t make it?"

"I haven’t even thought about it like that," he said, "because I’m planning on coming back . . ."