

# Merv

Merv Johnson:

## One of a Kind

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

Behind the color commentary on OU football broadcasts is a special sort of coach who set the Sooner standard for integrity.



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ABOVE: An intense Merv Johnson makes offensive line adjustments as #78 J. R. Conrad listens. Conrad was a four-year letterman 1992-95 when Gary Gibbs was the Sooners' head coach.

LEFT: A hopeful Johnson stayed as assistant head coach under Gibbs but his loyalty was tested as the decade wore on and the Sooners sank into mediocrity under Howard Schnellenberger and John Blake.





**B**arry Switzer still can recite the conversation almost word for word. The good fortune it foretold and the friendship it fortified brings a smile to his face.

When Switzer speaks of Merv Johnson, the man on the other end of the fortuitous chat, a genuine sense of respect quickly surfaces. The words come easily to the legendary former University of Oklahoma football coach, and they shed a glowing light on his long-time assistant.

"I had originally called to ask Merv's advice on who he thought the best available offensive line coach in the country was at the time and who might be interested in coming to Oklahoma," explains Switzer. "He thought about it for a minute and said, 'Me.' I asked him if he

was serious, since Notre Dame (where Johnson was offensive coordinator) had just won a national championship with Joe Montana at quarterback. I was thrilled to find out he was."

A few weeks later, Johnson moved his family—wife Cindy and their three children—and his future from South Bend, Indiana, to Norman, Oklahoma, and he has spent the last 24 years serving in some capacity—from assistant head coach to administrative duties—within the OU football program. Now 66, Johnson continues to provide a common thread that extends from the Switzer era though Bob Stoops' current Sooner regime.

Either as a coach or "spectator," Johnson has attended 286 consecutive OU football games since the 1979 Or-

ange Bowl. These days, besides functioning as Stoops' director of football operations and special assistant to Athletics Director Joe Castiglione, he also provides color commentary alongside Bob Barry on the Sooner Radio Network.

"It says a lot about Merv that he is still at Oklahoma, meaning his career has spanned my years and those of four other head coaches after me. I think it shows his strength of character and how important he's been to this program," offers Switzer, who hired Johnson to replace Donnie Duncan on his staff in January 1979.

Johnson slides back in his office chair at the Barry Switzer Center, folds his arms across his chest, cocks his head to one side and ponders the secret to his longevity, not only at OU, but as a collegiate





Merv Johnson's career took an upward turn in 1999, Coach Bob Stoops' first year, when he added to his director of football operations duties by joining play-by-play announcer Bob Barry in the Sooner Radio Network broadcast booth as color commentator.

coach in a business known for its turnover and unpredictable environment.

"Just lucky, I guess," he says modestly before pausing again.

"In this profession it is unusual I haven't moved around more than I have. In fact, I only worked for three coaches—Switzer, Frank Broyles and Dan Devine—for 30 years until Barry resigned here," adds Johnson. "It's just worked out that I've been able to remain at Oklahoma, see my children grow up in Norman and continue to be a part of something special."

Johnson was a part of three national championships during those first three decades—as an assistant at Arkansas in 1964, another at Notre Dame in 1977 and the third as Switzer's assistant head coach eight years later. At OU during the mid-1980s, Johnson coordinated one of the most dominating offensive lines in the country. Anthony Phillips, Mark Hutson, Greg Johnson and Bob Latham helped forge what Johnson described as "an irresistible force with great talent, great depth and great teamwork."

Of course, it has not been all fun and games. The 10 seasons between Switzer's departure in 1988 and Stoops' arrival in 1999 were the most taxing of Johnson's 40-

plus-year career as a coach. Not only was he passed over as Switzer's successor, he had to endure one of the darkest periods in OU football annals.

"That's all water under the bridge now. Sure, I would have thought being assistant head coach here for so long, I

would probably get the job when Barry left. But it didn't work out that way," says Johnson. "To be passed over at the school you've been working at for so long, and being 50 years old, that pretty much ended my head coaching aspirations.

"At that point, you can be disappointed and look around hoping you can make a lateral move to another program who knows where. But that's a tough decision because I loved Oklahoma and what I was doing. Eventually, I decided instead of uprooting my family and running all over the country trying to find a different job, I would swallow my pride and be a good soldier."

Johnson, who remained assistant head coach under Gibbs, felt the Sooners still had a reasonable chance to be successful despite looming NCAA sanctions. But as the decade unfolded, he could do little more than watch as the once-proud program spiraled into mediocrity. His role decreased with the succession of new head coaches, Howard Schnellenberger and John Blake, neither of whom were able to tap into the magic that so long had been a part of OU's winning tradition.

During a five-season span from 1994-98, the Sooners failed to produce a single winning record, compiling instead an overall mark of 23-33-1.

"To experience those four or five seasons we had there in a row was really



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Johnson gathers his 1993 offensive line, clockwise from upper left, Matt Wilson, Jeff Resler, Joe Carollo, Chuck Langston, Milton Overton and Harry Stamps.





Winning or losing, Johnson, shown here with Broderick Roberson in the early '90s, continued building treasured relationships with the players he coached.

embarrassing,” admits Johnson. “It became terribly frustrating. Initially, you wipe the slate clean and start over. Obviously, you want to be excited, and you want the best for the program. And you work to make those things happen. But the longer it goes on and you continually see things headed south, it’s hard to watch, much less be a part of.”

But Johnson endured, his saving grace being the relationships he continued to build with so many of the players he coached. The Sooners may not have been winning many football games, but not because Johnson was not rolling up his sleeves every day and imparting his knowledge and experience.

“I know that was tough on Merv, to see things drop off like that. He’s such a good football coach, such a good motivator,” says Switzer. “He always coached in a positive manner that created a sense of betterment in his players. That’s the kind of person he is.”

Johnson served as an assistant on Blake’s main staff for one season before taking the job as recruiting coordinator in 1997. The move allowed him to stay in touch with the team, while becoming more involved in the administrative aspects of coaching. But no matter what he did, Johnson could not avoid feeling helpless as the Sooners went 12-22 during Blake’s three seasons.

“It should never have been that way here at OU, where the program flounders like it did there for a few years,” offers Johnson. “We may not win a championship every year, but we should always be a factor in the conference race. That’s what Bob (Stoops) has brought back to the Sooners—a sense of urgency and an attitude that promotes positive results.”

Stoops is quick to return the compliment, pointing to the knowledge and character Johnson brings to the program on an everyday basis.

“Merv has meant a lot to this program for such a long time. He’s got experience

that we all value in a great way,” says Stoops. “Quite often I’ll go down and ask his opinion or how he feels about a certain situation or how he would handle it. He always has a lot of good insight into what he thinks is right or wrong or how to handle something.”

Some might question why he stayed through the dismal years prior to Stoops’ arrival, potentially risking his reputation while being a part of a program that labored for respectability. But no matter how discouraging the situation became, Johnson’s loyalty and passion for the Sooners overcame any temptation to jump ship.

“Merv Johnson is the epitome of class. He’s one of the few people who come along in a lifetime that everyone loves and most importantly, respects,” explains Castiglione. “That’s something that’s not given away, it’s earned. I think a lot of it has to do with the way he carries himself and the way he has always represented our university.”

The Oklahoma chapter of the National Football Foundation and College Hall of Fame recently echoed those very sentiments when it presented Johnson with its inaugural Integrity in College Coaching Award. The honor, to be given annually to a coach best representing the highest standard of integrity, is to be named for Johnson.

“We thought Merv was the best example of integrity in coaching and a great role model for future coaches,” says Gerald Gurney, associate athletics director at OU and a board member for the NFF chapter.

Not too bad for a kid from the tiny town of King City, Missouri, who almost became a veterinarian after finishing his playing career at the University of Missouri in 1957. Certainly the players and coaches who crossed paths with Johnson in the years since would agree he made the right decision.

“It’s flattering to have people think of you in a certain way and honor you. The award is special. I’m pleased mostly for my family because they supported me through everything I’ve done,” offers Johnson. “I’ve been fortunate enough to do something I love for such a long time and to be a part of such a marquee program with so much history. That’s been a tremendous thrill for me.”