

Progress 3: Johnson, CHS grad, shines in NFL

By Scott Levine Associate Editor | Posted: Friday, September 18, 2015 9:33 am

CLINTON — The National Football League is beginning to notice what many in the Gateway-area have known for years.

Clinton native David Johnson made his NFL debut with the Arizona Cardinals on Sept. 6 against the New Orleans Saints. The University of Northern Iowa rookie tallied his first NFL touchdown on his first NFL catch to seal the Cardinals victory on Sept. 13.

Johnson showed off his speed down the sideline after catching the pass from quarterback Carson Palmer. He outran the defense en route to a 55-yard touchdown reception. He also returned a kickoff 43 yards in his debut. The Cardinals will travel to nearby Chicago this weekend.

It shouldn't be a surprise that the highest draft pick from UNI since 2000 when Brad Meester was taken in the second round, and the first NFL draft pick from Clinton since Tom Quinn in 1969, got playing time right away. Several preseason experts targeted Johnson as a sleeper fantasy football pick at the running back position based on his potential and his ability to be a big-bodied back in the red zone.

Johnson dealt with a hamstring injury during the preseason, but head coach Bruce Arians is looking forward to seeing what the rookie can do during the rest of the season.

"He's a 225-pound back, but he's got what I call slalom-cutting ability and acceleration," Arians said after drafting Johnson in the third round of the NFL draft. "His pass-receiving skills are off the charts, but if you wanted to hand it to him 20, 25 times, he's used to that."

The NFL is a long way from when Johnson started his playing days in Clinton. Much of his foray into football was on the gridiron in middle school, during some back-and-forth battles between Washington and Lyons middle schools.

Many of those same seniors on a Clinton High School football that went undefeated in the regular season in 2009, played against each other in middle school.

Former Washington Middle School principal and current Whittier Elementary School principal Brian Kenney said this past spring that those games were intense.

"Washington versus Lyons were epic battles," Kenney said. "Washington won (Johnson played for Washington), but those were always close games."

Once Johnson left middle school, he started at Clinton High School for three years. The 6-foot-1, 224-pound running back started every game for the River Kings beginning with his first game as a sophomore.

While at Clinton, he was not only a part of a state-playoff football team, he also excelled on the track and hardwood. He was a two-time Drake and state qualifier, and earned a second-place finish in the 800 relay and 1,600 relay at Drake.

In basketball, he helped the River Kings to the state tournament during his senior year in 2010, where he averaged a team-best 15.7 points per game and 7.9 rebounds. He was a first-team all-league selection in the Mississippi Athletic Conference and a third-team all-state pick by the Iowa Newspaper Association.

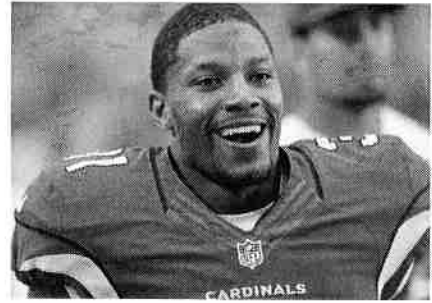
He was a second team all-state selection by the Des Moines Register.

But it was football where he shined brightest. During his senior year, the River Kings finished an undefeated regular season with a berth in the state quarterfinals, where the season ended against Cedar Rapids Xavier.

Johnson holds school records in total offense in a season with 2,128 yards and career at 4,694, and career pass receptions with 75 and career yards receiving at 1,168. He also is listed second on several other school records.

Johnson also is tied for 20th all-time in the state of Iowa in most touchdowns in a season with 40 in 2009, and is tied for 26th in the state of Iowa for all-time points in a season with 246 in 2009. The most remarkable aspect of those numbers is that Johnson sat for the majority of the second half during several blowouts during the 2009 season.

Despite the accolades, former Clinton High School football coach Lee Camp said Johnson didn't showcase a cocky attitude.



Cardinals vs Saints

Arizona Cardinals runningback David Johnson is all smiles following his first NFL touchdown, during their game against the New Orleans Saints, Sunday, Sept. 13, 2015, in Glendale, Arizona. (Photo/Roy Dabner)

"He was one of the best teammates you could have," Camp said before Johnson was drafted in the spring. "He possessed a lot of skill, but he was concerned about other players, too. He was the type of leader who was going to do it by example. He was going to have fun and work hard."

That hard work translated to UNI, where he was skipped over by several FBS programs. At UNI, Johnson continued to etch his name in the record books.

Johnson holds school records for most career rushing yards at 4,687 and touchdowns at 49. During the NFL combine, Johnson finished in the top five among running backs in five categories — the 40-yard dash at 4.5 seconds, the three-cone drill at 6.82 seconds, the vertical jump at 41.5 inches, the broad jump at 10 feet, 7 inches and the bench press at 25 repetitions at 225 pounds.

After he was drafted by the Cardinals, Johnson said he was ready to get started.

"I talked to the area scout; he was coming to all of my practices last year, and I got to talk to the running backs coach at the Senior Bowl," Johnson said after being drafted. "They said they were looking for a bigger back. They were looking for a back that could take carries, take the load and could just be a nice player for the team. They said I'd fit that mold really good."

It's that mold that Arizona and Johnson are counting on to continue for a long NFL career.

"It felt amazing," Johnson told the media after the win Sunday. "It felt like a great blessing. I'm glad to be on this team, and I love being here."