

= Ezra Johnson =

Ezra Ray Johnson ( born October 2 , 1955 in Shreveport , Louisiana ) is a retired American football defensive end who played for the Green Bay Packers , Indianapolis Colts and Houston Oilers in a fifteen @-@ year career that lasted from 1977 to 1991 in the National Football League ( NFL ) .

A first @-@ round pick from Morris Brown College by the Green Bay Packers in 1977 , Johnson was known as one of the best defensive linemen in his first few years in the league . Johnson earned a spot in the 1979 Pro Bowl after unofficially finishing second , to Detroit Lions Al " Bubba " Baker , with 20 @.@ 5 sacks in 1978 . ( Quarterback sacks were not an official NFL statistic until 1982 . ) However by 1981 , Johnson 's career was marred by a series of back injuries and allegations of his lack of discipline on the field , including one incident in which he ate a hot dog while sitting on the bench during a preseason game , and being inconsistent at times . He lost and regained his starting job multiple times during that period .

Johnson was exclusively used as the third @-@ down pass rush specialist after 1986 , and took a leadership role with the team . He was released by the Packers in 1988 and played with two seasons with the Colts , and one with the Oilers before retiring in 1991 . Despite his adverse relationship with the team at times , Johnson was elected to the Green Bay Packers Hall of Fame in 1997 .

= = College career = =

Johnson played college football at Morris Brown College in Atlanta , Georgia . In his last year at Morris Brown he had 112 tackles and 28 sacks . However his size and the small school he played for helped lower his draft stock . He was projected to go anywhere from the first to fourth rounds prior to the NFL Draft .

= = NFL career = =

= = = Green Bay Packers = = =

Johnson was drafted as the 28th pick of the first round in the 1977 NFL Draft by the Green Bay Packers . Johnson was considered a " gamble pick " for the Packers because of lack of major college experience and his relatively small size for a defensive end . In his rookie season , Johnson appeared in 14 games as the backup for Alden Roche at defensive end . Johnson significantly improved in his second year , becoming one of the top defensive ends in the league with his size and speed , a 4 @.@ 5 in the 40 @-@ yard dash , being the main factors for his success . He thrived on the Packers 4 ? 3 defense , and recorded 14 sacks by the eighth game of the season . Johnson had two sacks and forced two fumbles in a 45 ? 28 win against the Seattle Seahawks on October 16 , 1978 . At that time , the Packers had the best record in the NFC Central at 6 ? 1 . By the end of the year , Johnson recorded an unofficial 20 @.@ 5 sacks , a statistic used , but not kept , by the NFL until 1982 . However , the Packers offense were among the worst in the league , and the team lost a chance for a playoff berth in the final game of the season against the Los Angeles Rams . Johnson was rewarded for his efforts by being selected to play in the Pro Bowl and was rewarded with the Packers Defensive Player of the Year award .

In 1979 , Johnson missed seven games early in the season because of a sprained left ankle . On his return against the Minnesota Vikings on November 11 , he sacked quarterback Tommy Kramer four times in a 19 ? 7 win . During that period , Johnson teamed up with fellow first @-@ round pick Mike Butler to form one of the league 's most potent defensive lineups . Nicknamed the " Gang Green " , they became known for their ability to pressure the quarterback to force a sack .

Prior to the start to the 1980 season , Johnson was notoriously fined \$ 1 @,@ 000 and required by then @-@ general manager @-@ head coach Bart Starr to apologize for eating a hot dog on the sidelines during the fourth quarter of a 38 ? 0 Packers ' home preseason loss to the Denver Broncos

on August 30 , 1980 . Starr gave Johnson back the \$ 1 @, @ 000 at the end of the year . However , defensive line coach Fred von Appen resigned five days after the incident because Starr refused to suspend Johnson . He started in all 15 games that season , as the Packers finished with a 5 ? 10 ? 1 record . After the season , Johnson and Butler were both criticized for not playing up to the Packers expectations when they drafted them . One journalist stated that their development was halted because of a lack of stability in the Green Bay coaching situation , who went through four defensive line coaches in three years .

In 1981 , Johnson lost his starting role to Casey Merrill as the Packers had changed to a 3 ? 4 defensive scheme , and decided instead to use Johnson exclusively for pass rushing situations . It was a decision which confused the local media as Johnson had been the starter since 1978 . Merrill , who was released by the Cincinnati Bengals and claimed off waivers by the Packers , was considered by the team as the better , more consistent interior lineman against the run . The Packers claimed Johnson lost his job because of his lack of " size " and low upside . However , during the preseason , many people within the Packers organization " questioned " Johnson 's desire to play and his attitude , an allegation Johnson quickly denied . He also was fined by Starr an unknown amount of money for almost missing a team flight to New York after celebrating his birthday the previous night , misplacing his car keys . He only started three games that season .

By 1982 , Johnson regained his starting job over Merrill . Defensive coordinator John Meyer stated that Johnson was " playing his best football " since his breakout 1978 season . Johnson stated that " eating his mother 's cooking " and being " healthy " were the main reasons for his improvement . He signed a three @-@ year contract with the Packers at \$ 450 @, @ 000 a year . It led to a lawsuit against his former agency Bradcor Sports Servicing , who claimed that he never gave the agency their commission . He had an official career best of 14 @. @ 5 quarterback sacks in 1983 along with 107 tackles , a team record by a defensive lineman in a single season .

The success didn 't last long , as Johnson started to get hampered with back injuries , which reduced his effectiveness . In 1984 , Johnson had surgery for a herniated disk , an injury he suffered during training camp , and was known as a potential career @-@ ending injury . He missed the first game of the regular season against the St. Louis Cardinals and could not fully recover from the injury . Again he lost his starting job , becoming a third @-@ down pass @-@ rushing specialist , and was credited with seven sacks for the year ; the injury forced Johnson to mull retirement .

Prior to the start of training camp for the 1985 season , Johnson had a second surgery to repair his herniated disk . At the same time , Johnson took on a leadership role for the Green Bay defense , and started to accept his role as a backup and started to mentor the younger players . After injuries befell the Packers ' defensive line , Johnson regained his starting position at defensive end . He started all 16 games that year , achieving 9 @. @ 5 sacks . His career started to diminish after that season . In 1986 , Johnson was credited with three and a half sacks as he was used as the designated third @-@ down pass rushing specialist . He injured his right knee in 1987 , missing 10 of the first 11 games of the season . He was released by the Packers on January 8 , 1988 . At the time of his release , Johnson was the Packers ' all @-@ time leader in sacks with 84 .

= = = Indianapolis and Houston = = =

Johnson signed with the Indianapolis Colts in 1988 in order to provide experience to a young and inexperienced Colts squad . During his time with the Colts , Johnson was used as a part @-@ time starter in a role similar to his final few years with the Packers . He played in ten games that year , recording three sacks and played in all 16 games the following year , recording 8 @. @ 5 sacks . He joined the Houston Oilers in 1990 , where he played in all 16 games , starting three , and was credited with 2 @. @ 5 sacks . After playing two games for the Oilers in 1991 , Johnson retired .

He played in 192 games in his career , having officially 55 @. @ 5 quarterback sacks ( 99 when his unofficial totals are added ) .

= = Life after football = =

After retirement Johnson coached at Morris Brown and at Morehouse College . He was elected to the Green Bay Packers Hall of Fame in 1997 . He currently lives in the Atlanta area and has four children .