

David Gray Johnson – 1997 Inductee



Though naturally shy and reserved, a winning attitude and no-nonsense approach to teaching the basics enabled David Gray Johnson to not only become one of the winningest high school football coaches in Kansas history but also earn the respect and admiration of his peers and players throughout a forty-year teaching career. The eighth of nine children born to Herbert F. and Sara Belle (Goldthwait) Johnson, Dave, or "Big Dave" as he came to be affectionately known, was born May

20, 1927, in the New England town of Biddeford, York County, Maine. In early 1945 he graduated from high school at Ipswich, Massachusetts, where in the fall of his senior year the football coach was drafted into the army, leaving the school without any coaches on the staff. The school board decided to drop football, but Dave and another senior went before the board and convinced them to let Johnson coach the team, under the supervision of the math teacher. They won three games and lost two in a season that was shortened due to gas rationing during the war then going on.

After high school Dave served his military obligation in the Navy training to be a pilot. While serving he attended classes at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. On August 31, 1948, he married Betty Jean Slight in Long Beach, California in 1949. They had two children: Lucinda, born February 25, 1952, in Seward, Alaska, and Stephen, born January 16, 1954, in Nevada, Missouri. After the military Dave entered the University of Kansas in Lawrence, where he graduated with honors in 1952. For his graduate work he attended Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Dave's first teaching position began in 1951 at Sheldon, Missouri, where he was also the assistant coach for basketball and baseball. In 1955 he taught for a year at Moran, Kansas, and was the assistant coach for football and basketball. He then moved to Frankfort, Kansas, where he took over as the high school football coach. By stressing the football fundamentals of tackling, practice, blocking, practice, execution of plays, and more practice, his teams were an immediate and enduring success. *"His practices were harder than those we had at the University of Kansas,"* one player recalled afterwards. In his seven years at Frankfort the football team compiled a record of 48 wins, 14 losses, and four ties.



In 1963 Dave was named the new head football coach at Osborne, Kansas. That summer he became the baseball coach and drove the nearly three-hour round trip from his farm near Kanopolis, Kansas, to Osborne several days a week for 7:30 a.m. practice, at his own expense, in order to get to know the boys better. At Osborne he installed the Delaware wing offense he used throughout his coaching career and quickly turned the football team into a statewide power. From 1964 through 1968 Osborne enjoyed a 35-game winning streak and were named the Class B state champions in 1967. Another state championship was claimed in 1983, when the team won all thirteen of its games. Off the football field Dave coached several other sports and taught science, math, social science, and physical education. "Big Dave" never used headphones and called his own plays while pacing up and down the sidelines, clipboard in hand – a legendary sight to Osborne high school alumni. After twenty-eight years at Osborne High School he retired with a coaching record of 154 wins, 85 losses, and three ties, his teams making the state football playoffs three times. When he retired his 213 overall wins at the time placed him fifth in all-time wins among Kansas high school football coaches.

In 1969 Dave served on the Kansas State High School Activities Association Ad Hoc Committee that studied and recommended the implementation of a football playoff system for all high schools in Kansas. In 1983 he was named All-Area Coach of the Year and was chosen as one of the coaches for the West team at the Kansas Shrine Bowl. In 1989 Dave was named Teacher of the Year at Osborne and was a nominee for Teacher of the Year at the state level. That same year an appreciation dinner was held in his honor in Osborne after the last game of the season. Nearly two hundred former football players, former assistant coaches, family, and friends gathered to pay tribute to the coach who had influenced so many people on and off the field. The capstone of his career came in February 1993 when he was inducted into the Kansas State High School Activities Association Hall of Fame.

In nominating Dave for the Kansas State High School Activities Association Hall of Fame, fellow football coach Steve Miller noted that the stories told of Johnson over the years were not only of winning football but also stories of getting athletes *"to make commitments, demanding them to be positive role models, possess work ethics, and be punctual. He taught them respect for adults, school, family, and country."* Dave led his players by example; he did not smoke, drink, or use profanity, and often became a parent to them. *"He kept me and about three other kids in my class out of jail,"* remembered one player. The words used by other players go a long way in describing their former coach: tough; perfectionist; dedicated; intimidating; prepared. Johnson himself described his philosophy of coaching this way: *"I never worried so much about winning or losing as I did about helping those boys grow up to be men. That's why I was so hard on them."*

After his retirement in 1991 Dave and his wife Betty moved permanently back to the family farm near Kanopolis, where he currently enjoys a settled life in the country. The days of "Big Dave" pacing the sidelines may be over, but he will always hold a much-deserved place in the Osborne County Hall of Fame.