

No. 80: Vance Johnson

Hansen's Hundred, No. 80: Vance Johnson was a two-sport UA star, part of NFL's 'Three Amigos'

By [Greg Hansen](#)

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UA receiver Vance Johnson leaps out of the camera frame for a completed pass during Arizona's 13-10 win over USC in 1981. Johnson caught the game-winning pass.

H. Darr Beiser, Tucson Citizen 1981

[Greg Hansen](#)

Vance's Johnson family home near Cholla High School became the site of an epic Arizona-vs.-ASU showdown on college football letter-of-intent day, February 1981.

Sun Devil track coach Len Miller spent most of the previous afternoon at Johnson's home. ASU football coach Darryl Rogers phoned four times. Arizona coach Larry Smith, returning from a recruiting trip to

San Francisco, drove straight from the airport to Johnson's house at 5 p.m.

That didn't deter Miller; he spent the night in his car outside Johnson's house.

The next morning, Johnson signed with Arizona.

"I changed my mind four times," he said. "ASU is hoping I make it five."

Johnson, who is No. 80 on our list of Tucson's Top 100 Sports Figures of the last 100 years, was an irresistible football and track prospect. He ran the 100-yard dash in 9.6 seconds at Cholla and gained 1,258 yards rushing. ASU thought he could win an Olympic medal in the long jump. Arizona thought he could become an NFL running back.

"In the end," said Johnson. "I went to Arizona because they needed me. ASU said I could help them."

Here's what "needed me" looked like in Johnson's Arizona career:

He won the NCAA long jump championship in 1982 with a school record 26 feet 11¹/₄ inches.

Johnson was a first-team All-Pac-10 running back in 1982. He alternated between tailback and receiver during his football career, rushing for 1,871 yards and 1,064 yards worth of passes. He scored 31 touchdowns. When he left school after the '84 season, Johnson ranked No. 2 behind Arizona's 1950s standout Art Luppino in career total offense.

Johnson launched his career on opening night, 1981, catching six passes for 96 yards against UCLA. But his most memorable afternoon

as an Arizona football player came a month later, against No. 1 USC at the Los Angeles Coliseum.

With the Wildcats trailing 10-6 in the fourth quarter, Johnson caught a pass near the line of scrimmage and bolted 13 yards to the end zone, using his exceptional speed to avoid USC's roster of all-stars for a touchdown.

It was the winning touchdown in Arizona's stunning 13-10 upset.

Eight months later, Johnson won the NCAA long jump championship in Provo, Utah, breaking the school record of 1964 Olympian Gayle Hopkins. Said Johnson: "When I scored the winning touchdown against USC, I thought that was the biggest thing of my life. But this is bigger."

Johnson had broken his personal best, 25-9½, by more than a foot.

With aspirations to play in the NFL, Johnson was never able to fully concentrate on the long jump. But at the U.S. 1984 Olympic Track and Field Trials in Los Angeles, he was in strong contention to make Team USA, on the same long jump squad as legendary Carl Lewis.

But Johnson's jump of 26-6¼ was about two inches shy of making the American team. He later said it was the biggest disappointment of his sports career.



Cholla High School track star Vance Johnson on the lead-off leg of a relay in April 1981.
Manuel Miera, Tucson Citizen 1981

Johnson's NFL career — he was the 31st overall selection in the 1985 draft — became superior to that of his UA career, if that's possible. He became one of the famous “Three Amigos” of the Denver Broncos receiving corps, helping quarterback John Elway's Broncos to three Super Bowls from 1987 to 1990.

Johnson caught 415 passes for 5,695 yards and 31 TDs in 10 NFL seasons. He meets all the criteria to be recognized at Arizona Stadium's Ring of Honor but has yet to be inducted.

After his football career, Johnson struggled. In 2018, he wrote a biography “Uncovered: Why Becoming Less Became Everything.”

It is a story of Johnson's long problem with addiction and domestic issues, which he has discussed on television shows with Oprah

Winfrey, Maury Povich and Wendy Williams. He now is featured as a “Recovery Ambassador” on the A&E television series “Intervention.”

Johnson, who lives in Las Vegas, told the “Intervention” cast he has been drug-free and sober for seven years.

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