

HOW GRAND IS



GRANDMAMA?

The Charlotte Hornets' Larry Johnson

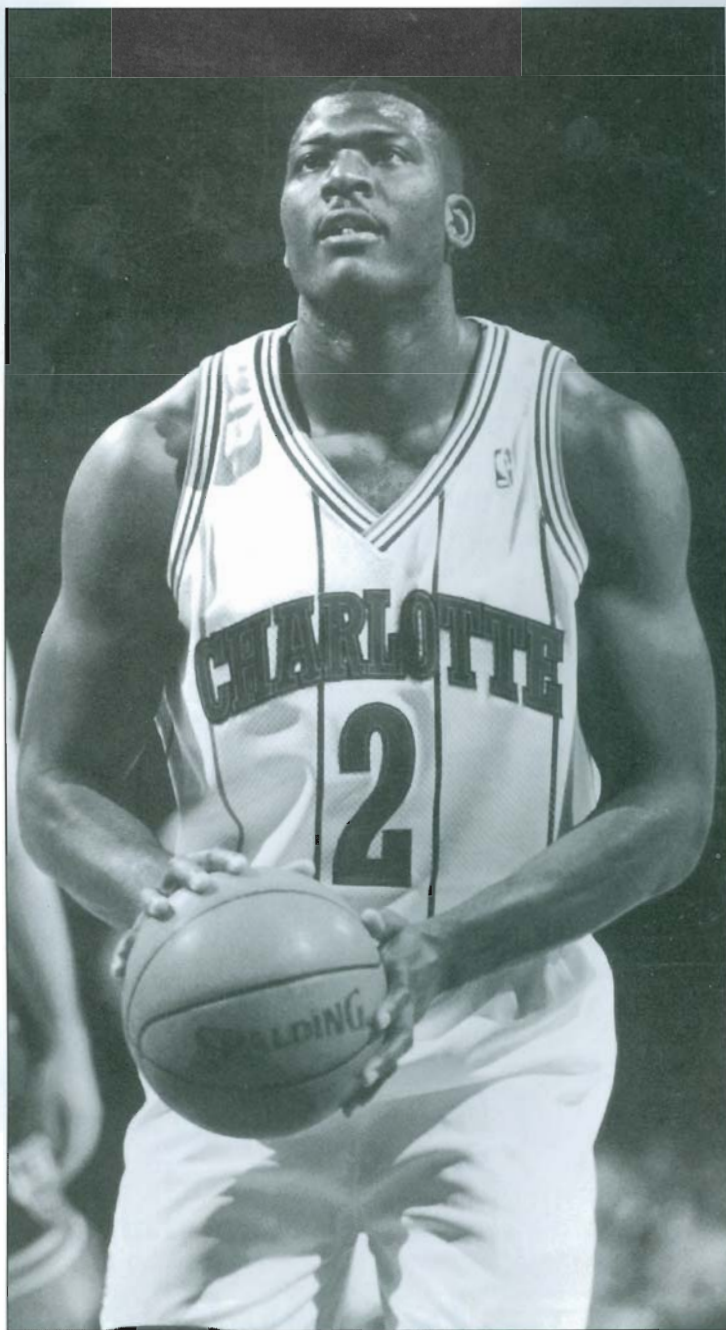
by DR. GREG SHEPARD

You've probably seen the TV commercials about Grandmama Johnson, the old lady who dunks a basketball. Well, that's Larry Johnson, the Charlotte Hornets' number one draft pick from UNLV. He is 6-5 1/2 in bare feet, weighs 250 pounds and has a gold tooth.

Last year Johnson averaged 19.2 points and 11 rebounds and was the NBA Rookie of the year. This year he made the NBA All-Star team and averaged 22.3 points and 10.6 rebounds while leading the Hornets to their best finish ever and a first ever playoff berth.

Because of an article written by Chris Tomasson in HOOP magazine (the NBA program sold at NBA games), I really wanted to do an article on Larry; but it turned out much different than I imagined when I interviewed him after a Utah Jazz-Hornet game.

However, before I get into that interview, here is some of that article by



Larry Johnson

Tomasson who writes for the Spartanburg (SC) Herald Journal:

"I never had any doubts that I could play well immediately," Johnson said. "From Day 1, I never looked at myself as a rookie. I've been playing basketball all my life."

It was the type of basketball Johnson played early in his life that really prepared him for the wars of the NBA. Johnson grew up in a South Dallas neighborhood where basketball, like everything else, was survival of the fittest. The area was beset with drugs, violence and poverty.

"It was day-to-day survival," Johnson said. "It was ghetto life. You couldn't play basketball without there being fights. If you went the whole week without a fight, it was your turn to fight on Saturday."

Johnson said that he had "guns, knives, sticks, poles, you name it" pulled on him. He never carried any weapons because his mother, Dortha, made sure he never was armed.



When asked what he fought with, Johnson clinched his massive fists and said, "These right here."

Johnson was no angel. He admits he stole as a youngster, and came very close to being sent away for his teenage years.

"I was picked up a few times and I would have had to go to a boys home," Johnson said. "But the boys home in Texas was full, and they couldn't send you out of state. That was a break for me, because I might have been sent away until I was 18."

"Instead of sending me away, they used to make me go to boxing every day. It was run by the Police Athletic League. It was good for me because it kept me off the streets and gave me something else to do.

"We used to go around stealing and robbing bikes and going into a store and taking stuff. There was this store called Menus, a grocery store in Dallas. We owned Menus. We used to go in there and grab stuff and walk up to the cash register like we were going to pay. Then we'd hit the door. We were 13-14 years old and nobody was going to chase us."

Johnson could have kept running from the law, but he discovered organized athletics. A major influence in his life was Ed Weston, Johnson's first basketball coach at John B. Hood Middle School.

"He found out what a great athlete he was, and that kept him busy

and off the streets," Weston said. "Not only was he a big star for us in basketball, but he played center field on the baseball team, he was a goalie in soccer, he was quarterback on the football team and he ran track. Five sports—there wasn't much time for anything else! Sure, Larry had some problems, like a lot of people in that neighborhood did, but right away you could see that



Larry Johnson and Coach Shepard after the Hornets victory over the Utah Jazz

Larry was so much more focused than anybody else. He knew what he wanted to do."

And that was to play basketball. Dortha Johnson said her son would stay up some nights until 3 a.m. shooting baskets underneath a street light. Johnson became a star at John B. Hood and a star at Skyline High. Soon the temptations of a street life were a thing of the past.

"In his first game as a freshman, Larry begged and begged me to let him play with the varsity,"

said Skyline Coach J.D. Mayo. "I finally agreed, and he went out there and shot 8-for-8 from the field, 1-for-1 from the foul line and had eight rebounds."

By the time Johnson was a senior, he was named the national high school player of the year by one organization. He was pretty good in the weight room, too. Johnson shattered all of Skyline's weightlifting records.

Johnson wanted to stay in Dallas and play for Southern Methodist, but a controversy surrounding his SAT score prevented him from enrolling. So Johnson went to Odessa (Texas) Junior College.

Most players in junior college labor in obscurity, but not Johnson. He was the two-time JUCO player of the year, and nearly every Division I program wanted him. He ended up at Nevada-Las Vegas, where he led the Runnin' Rebels to a national championship

and picked up a few more national player of the year awards.

"Think about it," Mayo said. "He has been somebody's player of the year five years in a row. Has anybody else done that?"

"Larry's winning attitude and his toughness are contagious," said Charlotte owner George Shinn. "They've spread throughout the entire organization. He's a winner."

Charlotte Coach Allan Bristow calls Johnson the best "natural rebounder" since Moses Malone. He says Johnson has no equal



when it comes to toughness. But Bristow notes that despite his enforcer image on the court, Johnson is a very charitable person.

"Before he every stepped on the court, he became a very notable figure here in Charlotte with a donation he made to the United Way," Bristow said. "That's just something to show people across the country that he's not only a great basketball player, but also a great person."

Johnson donated \$180,000 to the United Way after he signed his first pro contract. He also made large contributions of shoes and money to Skyline High, Odessa Junior College and UNLV.

Soon Johnson may follow Michael Jordan as an NBA legend, the way Jordan followed Magic Johnson and Larry Bird.

"I think about that a great deal," Johnson said. "I want to be the star of the next generation. I want to make the league better for players who are now in the ninth grade.

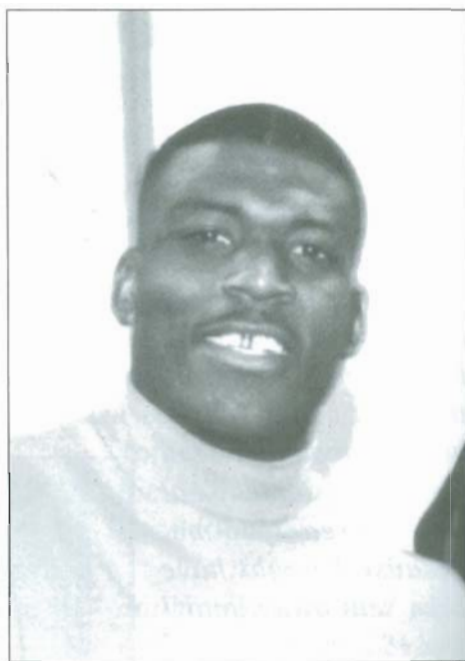
"I would love for people to say that Larry Johnson is the next Michael Jordan. It makes me want

to go to my garage and start lifting weights right now. I don't want to be just one of those guys who averages 12-15 points and then goes back to his hometown and he's the big guy. I want to be more than that. I want to be the best of my time."

As you can see from Tomasson's article, a number of statements loom large enough to perk Bigger Faster Stronger's interest. First, is the shattering of all of the high school weightlifting records. Second, the comment about wanting to go to his garage and start lifting weights whenever he is compared favorably to Michael Jordan and third, Larry's extraordinary "ghetto life" as a youngster. Somewhere, I figured, there had to be a good story. So I scheduled an interview with the Hornets' front office; but what transpired was totally unexpected.

I was told to meet Larry at the 5:30 p.m. shootaround before the game at the Jazz' Delta Center. Finally, the Hornet team began walking down the corridor towards their dressing room. It wasn't hard to pick Larry out and I approached him. After introducing myself I explained that we were scheduled for an interview. Larry stared unemotionally straight ahead and said, "Not now. After the game." Well, so much for planning. However, after being around the Jazz for 11 years, I understood his response so I didn't get upset like you'd think.

Johnson and Alonzo Mourning were terrific as the Hornets beat the Jazz. After the game, reporters were everywhere with recorders and cameras. They were all over Larry. I just waited. Finally, I reintroduced



**Larry Johnson — The 1992
Rookie of the Year**

myself and told him I was also the strength coach for the Utah Jazz. This caused him to look at me warily.

I asked him some standard BFS questions like "does lifting screw up your touch?" His answer, "Basketball coaches used to think that, but not now." I asked him if he lifted in high school and about going out to his garage to start lifting. With the garage thing, he snorted. You see Larry's background, where he grew up, provided him with a competitive spirit and mistrust. All through everybody's interviews and mine, this blank stare was evident. He's required to be available for the press and what he really wanted was to leave. The temptation to play with the press is overwhelming. The reference to going out and lifting in his garage had been an obvious put-on and a veiled slam against Michael Jordan.

**"He Has Been
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Five Years in a Row.
Has Anybody Else
Done That?"**

— J. D. Mayo

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Larry Johnson does have his own weight training facility but his use of it is sporadic. Larry stated, "You gotta be able to play, man. You gotta play the game."

He meant that weights are of limited value. Larry said, "I was probably my strongest in high school." He also revealed that, in the off season, his best bench had been around 375 pounds. When I commented that he and Karl Malone were similar in strength, he gave me that competitive snort again. "Yeh, but Karl can't crossover."

In subsequent interviews with Chip Sigmon, Hornet strength coach, and Skyline High School basketball coach, J.D. Mayo, more questions were answered. I was delighted to hear that Coach Sigmon had the Hornets doing the BFS Dot Drill, but he also confirmed that Larry's dedication to weights was sporadic. However, Alonzo Mourning was another matter. Alonzo did everything in Coach Sigmon's program enthusiastically and loved it. Of course I made a mental note to do a BFS story on Alonzo in a future journal. Coach Sigmon concluded that Larry possessed natural strength and could possibly benefit from doing the whole Hornet program.

Coach Mayo couldn't really remember about Larry's workouts in high school as ex-football coach Arvis Donner did most of the weightroom coaching. Obviously, though, Larry was very strong and a coach could make a great living having a Larry Johnson around

every four years.

At this point, Larry was getting impatient and he clearly wanted to be on his way, but then I asked this question, "Tell me about your high school football career and especially about your boxing." It was like magic. Larry completely changed and, grinning with his gold tooth sparkling, exclaimed. "How'd you know about that? Now boxing, that's something to really talk about." I muttered that I do my homework. Larry revealed himself again. "My mom loved me playing football in high school, but she thought my real sport was boxing. She never really saw me play basketball until my senior year."

Larry did not play football in his senior year at Skyline High School so he could concentrate on his other sports. Then I asked him about his father and he turned and responded, "I never seen my father." He tried hard not to show any emotion and I'm sure he's practiced that response many times, but underneath all of the protective emotional walls I felt a certain sadness. You wouldn't be human if you didn't feel something.

"Let's talk deep for awhile," I said. "Bigger Faster Stronger wants to help young athletes reach their fullest potential in all areas of life and be truly successful and happy. We are much more than a strength and conditioning magazine. Larry (pause) what can we do about gangs and their crimes and violence?"

We proceeded to speak man to

man with a real purpose but his answers were so disturbing, I went home and wept.

"I go home (Dallas) and I hang with my boys," Larry said. Boys in this case means peers of his in the same age group. Larry continued, "We talk and have fun, but when something's goin' down, they tell me to leave; so I go." Something goin' down means a drug deal, a crime or an act of violence. They respect Larry for his status in the NBA and don't want to place him in a position of embarrassment which could cost him in many ways. Larry knows his friends don't have a chance and that's why he's now "preachin' school—stay in school."

Larry sadly shook his head, "The 18 and 19 year olds are gone. I can't tell them anything or preach to them. In my neighborhood, you work with 6 and 7 year olds; then you got a chance. I see them out at 3 and 4 a.m. and tell 'em to go home and sleep and then go to school in the morning." He then smiled and looked me in the eye, "They listen to me."

My oldest son, Matt, was at the interview and took the pictures of myself and Larry. I gave Matt a long hug and told him I was glad he was my son. Matt is 18 and found it incredulous that kids his age were beyond hope.

Later that night I walked softly into my six year old's room. His name is Mark. I looked down at his sweet innocent face and kissed him tenderly, being careful not to let my tears disturb his sleep....▲

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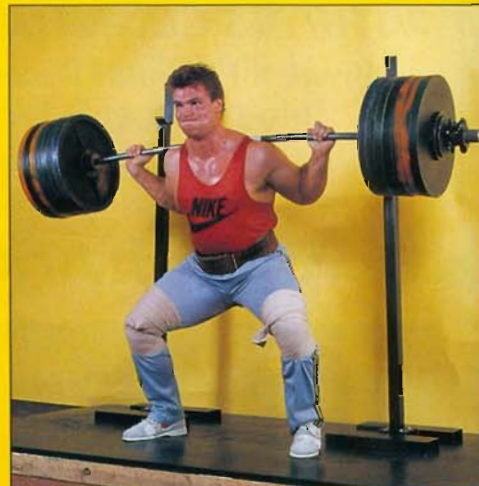
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