

# CHARLES JOHNSON

## ALL-AMERICA CANDIDATE University of Colorado

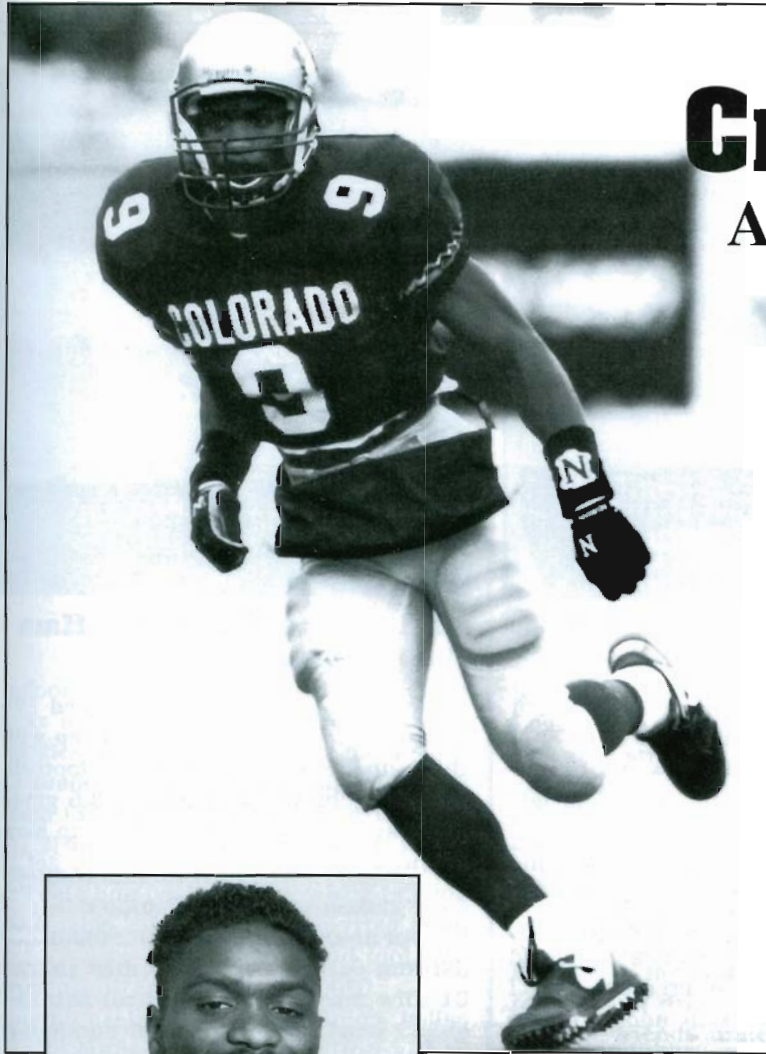


Photo: Mark D. Brodie

Charles Johnson, Nickname: C.J.

### By Dr. Greg Shepard

Charles took pills from his mother's purse and spread them along his blanket in 20 groups of two. He wrote a brief note, "Bye Mom and Christine, I love you." Then, in what Charles thought would be his final terrible moment of life, he took the pills and laid down on his bed with the note resting on his forehead. He closed his eyes and waited for death to come.

That was in June 1989 at the end of Charles' sophomore year at Cajon High School in San Bernardino, California. What would cause a young man to want to escape life through suicide? Well, what happened to Charles Johnson is one of the most remarkable stories we've every had at Bigger Faster

Stronger. Charles gives us all hope, a hope for mankind. His life is firm testimony of the greatness of the human spirit - a testimony of unparalleled determination.

Charles grew up without a father in Port Arthur, Texas. Life was tough for Charles and his sister Christine. Their mother was heavily into cocaine. The

family was constantly moving and money that could have been spent on things like food were spent on drugs. They lived in motels, apartments and houses. Eleven different places. Never in one place for more than five months.

Many times Christine and Charles would go to bed hungry. "It got to the point where I convinced myself that I didn't have to eat. I learned to take the pain," said Charles.

Charles would take a city bus and arrive at school by 7:45. He participated in football, basketball and track. After practice, he would sell newspaper subscriptions so he could eat and have some spending money. Charles was usually home by eleven, but sometimes his mother would be missing. The only football practice Charles ever missed, according to Chuck Pettersen, his high school coach, was to look for his mother by combing the downtown area.

Sometimes Charles worked so late he'd miss the last bus home. His solution was to sleep under a tree with his head resting on his book bag and then take the early morning bus home at 5:00 a.m. Coach Pettersen told Charles repeatedly, "Don't do that to

yourself. Your real ticket out of poverty is getting an education through sports. Focus on that - nothing else."

Charles had 3.3 grades and started on the varsity basketball team as a sophomore. He was also a track standout and he was scheduled to be a starter in football for his junior year. If he could just hold on for another two years, maybe he could leave his dreadful situation.

Right after his sophomore year in June, two friends asked Charles to attend their graduation. This event was important to him and he saved his money from work to buy a new pair of shoes for the graduation ceremony. His mother eyed that money and asked to borrow it and promised to pay it back that day. Drug addiction is a terrible thing and the money was never returned. This had happened often to Charles but this time, the effect was different.

"There were too many problems and too much I just couldn't handle," remembered Charles. "That was the first time I gave up." He dug up some loose change and bought some cards for his friend's graduation. Charles gave the cards to another friend and told him to hand them out because he wouldn't be at graduation. That's when Charles swallowed his mother's pills and laid down to end his life's struggle.

It didn't happen. Fortunately, his friends and sister found him in time. Charles woke up hours later vomiting everywhere. Charles sighed, "I guess it wasn't time for me to die yet." There was an outpouring of love and support.

Coach Pettersen fed him some meals. Good friends like Amar Washington and Doneka Buckner did the same with their families. Doneka was Charles' basketball teammate and in late July, Doneka and his sisters, Tanya and Sonja, asked their mother Jerry what they could do to help. They



**C.J. Learned That Lifting Weights Helped His Speed**

decided together. They invited Charles to live with them. This meant stability, regular good food and a real home. Still, Charles asked for time to make a decision.

However, the ugly cocaine addiction reared its ugly head once again. Charles' mother had stolen his sneakers. That was the final straw. Charles left and moved in with the Buckners. "Life was so easy," remembered Charles. "All I had to worry about was school, sports and keeping my room clean." He constantly worried about Christine and told his sister to call whenever she wanted.

Charles had a great junior year of football as he snagged 29 catches for 654 yards and 12 touchdowns. He made All-League and was touted as a pre-season High School All-American for his senior year, and listed as a Super Prep All-American, ranking as the 15th and 26th overall player. In basketball, Charles was a defensive specialist and established a school record in number of steals. Even with all this notoriety, Charles always remembered his family. During a recruiting trip, he could only afford one Christmas gift, a white ceramic Nebraska serving dish. He wrote the following note to accompany the dish: "Mom, sorry I don't have enough money to buy presents for the rest of the family. Merry Christmas. Love, Charles."

The stage was set for a spectacular senior year, but it was not to be. Charles separated the ligament from the bone in his knee. He played in only 1 1/2 games but still managed 8 catches for 200 yards and 4 touchdowns.



**Charles Ran Hurdles At The NCAA'S**

Amazingly, he got 9 out of 10 votes for "Best-in-the-West" honors.

"After that, I knew my career could end at any point," said Charles. "The operation left a foot long scar. That got me focused." Christine and his mother moved back to Houston but his sister became his reason to excel academically. "She was my motivator," said Charles. "I owe a lot of credit to her. I felt I had to do something and be somebody so my little sister would look up to me. She had no one to go to. I was all she had because of my mom and her drugs.

"I didn't think I was going to get recruited after my injury, but I got visits to UCLA, Washington, Nebraska, Arizona and Colorado. I was kind of easy to please," joked Charles. "I didn't care about the weather, being far from home or the offense. Anyway, I picked Colorado because of their team unity and togetherness."

Charles finished his high school career in fine style running the 300 Intermediate Hurdles in 37.56, good enough for a state runner-up finish. He also ran the 110 highs in 14.19. The Buffaloes needed Charles' athleticism immediately and he did not redshirt. The first time he touched the ball, he raced 26 yards for a touchdown against Kansas State. He saw action in the last seven games including the Orange Bowl and won the Lee Willard Award for being Colorado's outstanding freshman. However, that was nothing compared to what Charles would accomplish academically.

"I got carried away my freshman year," admitted Charles. "I took 44



**C.J. Doing The Glute Ham Developer**

semester hours." You only need 120 semester hours to graduate. Even with this unbelievable overload and football, Charles achieved a sparkling 3.5 grade point average. "People told me to slow down, but I was determined to get it done. I was very organized and also I'm not a party person." Charles existed on only four hours of sleep.

Charles or C.J. as he is now called, continued his relentless pursuit of his college degree in marketing. Statistics show that only 40% of Division I college football players graduate. So graduating in five years is a wonderful accomplishment. To do it in four years is remarkable. Charles Johnson did it in three years.

"Ever hear of that?" exclaimed Colorado Football Coach Bill McCartney. To graduate in three years and play football is truly extraordinary. I can't say enough about how hard it was and C.J. never knew until the end that it would be a reality."

"Education is the most important part of school," asserted C.J. "It is not athletics. What if you got hurt? If you come from a background like mine, you should use education as a way out of obstacles, the ghetto, drugs or poverty. Education can change lives for the better. It takes a lot of hard work and determination. You have to be goal oriented to be successful. You have to have the attitude of never being satisfied. Always keep your head up no matter what the obstacle."

Coach Pettersen was like a father and C.J. never forgot his influence. C.J. wrote him a letter and it read:



# Charles Johnson Colorado Receiver Received College Degree in Three years

Dear Coach,

Don't be surprised about this letter because I would never forget about you. . . You told me school was always first and that's the way I've decided to approach it. . . I owe you many thanks for helping me get through the hell I went through for four years. Well Coach, I guess it's time.

Love Always,

Charles

C.J. has lettered three times in indoor track and twice outdoors. Last year he participated in the 55-meter hurdles (7.56 best) and was a member of Colorado's national qualifying mile relay team (3:09.67). C.J. also ran the 400 (47.2) and the 400-hurdles (50.04) which qualified him for NCAA's.

Football went even better. As a sophomore, C.J. led the Buffs in kickoff returns with a 19.4 average (10 returns) and tied for third on the team with 13 receptions for 216 yards. Then Coach McCartney restructured the offense to accommodate more passing and what a junior year C.J. had as he and teammate Michael Westbrook became only the fourth receiving pair in NCAA history to go over the 1,000-yard mark in the same season.

C.J. caught 57 passes for a Colorado record amassing 1,149 yards (20.2 average) and five touchdowns. He averaged 57 yards per catch on those five TD's with the longest being 92 yards against Oklahoma. He entered the 1993 senior season as Colorado's all-time leading receiver with 1,365 career yards and being touted as a strong All-American candidate. After the first five games, C.J. had

You may ask at this point what C.J. did in the weight room. "I was stubborn," declared C.J. "I thought lifting weights wouldn't help me. I never really lifted in high school. Also, the Colorado coaches thought I was lifting. They let it go because I was doin' OK and also I was out for track, but then they started getting on me. Doc Kreis and Dave Plettl got me going for my senior year. I was insecure because I didn't know how to lift. Assistant Coach Plettl went one on one with me.

"I started getting motivated and when I got faster - I became convinced. That speed increase got me even more motivated. As a result, I had my best year ever in track. If I were a high school coach, my players would lift for sure. I'm now 190 pounds. You can see a difference in me. I'm in the best shape of my life. I'd recommend to start lifting early in sports. I could have been better had I started in high school."

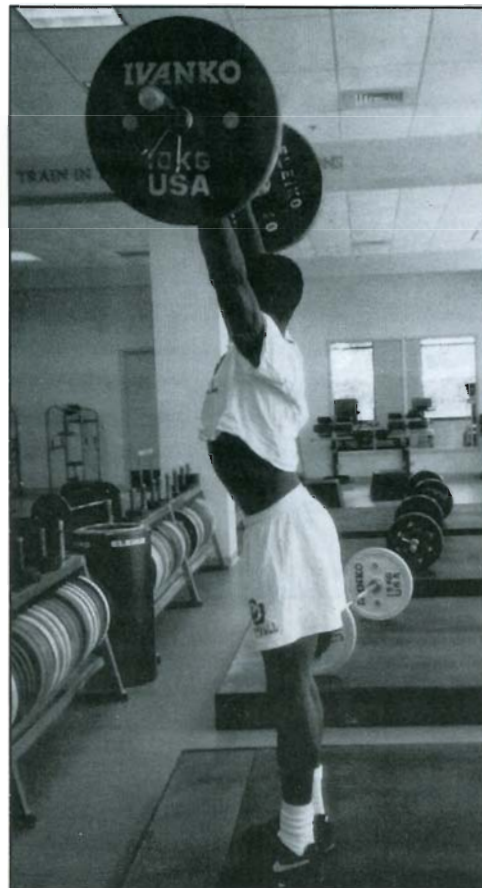
E.J. "Doc" Kreis is in his first year with Colorado and has a new title and we at BFS like it. Doc is called the Speed, Strength and Conditioning Coach. He is one of the most knowledgeable strength coaches in the business with an extensive background. He has written a fine book on athletic strength and conditioning.

C.J. has never had a drop of beer or alcohol in high school or college. "People may think I've abstained because of my mother," said C.J., "but I really don't drink because of athletics. My true friends understand. I figure if anyone hassles me about not drinking, they wouldn't be my true friend. Then it doesn't matter what is said. A true friend will help you do good things. They back you and listen to you but will stop you when things aren't right. The biggest thing in helping kids who go wrong is finding a true friend."

C.J. hopes to have a prosperous NFL career and take advantage of any financial opportunities by investing wisely. Ten years from now C.J. sees himself working in a great job and using his educational skills. Then, he spoke softly, "I hope to have my own family someday and provide them with stability and love."

As far as his present family, C.J. has two to love. He thinks of the Buckner's as his adoptive family and refers to Mrs. Buckner as Mom. Doneka is his brother and Tanya and Sonja are his sisters. His real sister, Christina, is now 19 and doing well. C.J. rarely sees his real mother, but reports with gratitude, that she has been clean for the last two years.

It seems determination runs in the family. We are grateful for C.J. and his Upper Limit story which has been a great inspiration to all.....□



**ONE SET 8 - 12**  
"Wouldn't want to do that. I'd do it the other way. I wouldn't go behind the Strength Coaches back, I'd do extra."  
-Charles Johnson

