

Not Happy Anniversary: How a failed toast sent a Cowboys dynasty spiraling

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"There's no blame. It's just a matter of, we've gone through a little transition here."

It was an understatement bigger than the entire state of Texas, a casual encapsulation so absurd that the room full of jaded sportswriters erupted in shocked, stunned, barely-controlled laughter.

The man who had delivered the line took in the reaction, reconsidered the reality of his words, and flashed the smile that had become so prevalent around the Valley Ranch facility, especially over the course of the previous year.

Jimmy Johnson leaned into the mic once again.

"Maybe it's a big transition."

Jerry Jones shifted in the chair next to Johnson, the final time the two men would sit next to one another as the owner and head coach of the Dallas Cowboys.

The date was March 29, 1994. The unlikely marriage that had rocked the NFL 1,858 days earlier- and resulted in a matching pair of Lombardi Trophies in the last 423- had just ended.

"We have mutually decided that I would no longer be the head football coach with the Dallas Cowboys," Johnson had said just moments earlier. From the defending Super Bowl champions, already talking about an unprecedented third straight title, it was a bombshell of an announcement. But for those who had been following the team, it was anything but a surprise.

Cracks before the breakup



1990: Head coach Jimmy Johnson (left) and owner Jerry Jones of the Dallas Cowboys stand together prior to the start of a Cowboys game at Texas Stadium in Irving, Texas. Mandatory Credit: Allen Dean Steele/Allsport

Between Jones and Johnson, little things had become big things over five seasons together. Hairline fractures in the foundation had grown. The damages were now irreparable, the differences irreconcilable. And as in most divorces, the writing had been on the wall for some time.

Each side had a laundry list of complaints.

Jerry tried to be too hands-on. He wasn't truly as involved in the day-to-day football operations as he wanted the world to believe. His fourth-quarter sideline visits had become a distraction. His habit of inviting VIP guests to mingle with players in the locker room and at training camp were counterproductive to getting the team focused on playing football. Jerry insisted on taking far more credit for the team's turnaround than he deserved. He has too big an ego. After all, Jimmy reasoned, *I'm the coach*.

Jimmy leaked information to the media. He undermined ownership by unilaterally making personnel and roster decisions. He made a cheap-shot joke on a late-night TV talk show about Jerry pocketing money given to the team by the league for a post-Super Bowl party. He publicly acknowledged being "intrigued" by a possible coach-and-general-manager dual role with the expansion franchise in Jacksonville. Jimmy insisted on not sharing as much credit for the team's turnaround as was deserved. He has too big an ego. After all, Jerry reasoned, *I'm the owner and GM*.

But there were other stories, too, transgressions that actually dated back to the early days of the Jones/Johnson regime.

In his book *Boys Will Be Boys: The Glory Days and Party Nights of the Dallas Cowboys Dynasty*, author Jeff Pearlman writes that Jones had talked about ousting Johnson in just his third season with the club:

"I knew as early as 1991 that I might want to make a change with Jimmy," Jones said. "My attitude at the time- and I told this to Jimmy- was, 'You're doing a good job, but don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out.' There were a couple of times during the 1992 season that he practically invited me to make the change. There were two times when I had to sit him down and tell him that this is how it's going to be or else." Well before Jones-versus-Johnson had begun to trickle into the mainstream media, Jones would confer with his family over how little respect he was afforded from his coach. "I'm going to fire his ass," he'd say. "I can go out and find myself another coach."

Pearlman also recounts the story of Fletcher Rudisill. Rudisill was a 27-year-old defensive tackle who had been a starter at Hudson Valley Community College. Jones met Rudisill at a bar and personally invited him to participate in 1993's training camp, sight unseen. Jones was convinced Rudisill was a diamond in the rough. Under Johnson's watchful eye at camp, though, he "couldn't jog twenty feet without stopping to vomit" and was cut after two weeks. "This is the guy Jerry sent me," Johnson explained to reporters with a contempt that was obvious.

It wasn't the first time the two had clashed over a player. Johnson shrewdly kept a recovered Troy Aikman on the bench for the start of the 1991 postseason, starting Steve Beuerlein after the backup had won five straight games following an Aikman injury. But it was Jones who was trumpeting to the Dallas press in no uncertain terms that Aikman was, in fact, the future of the franchise. The quarterback controversy surrounded the Cowboys leading up to their wild card win over Chicago and again in advance of their divisional loss to Detroit, when Aikman finally replaced Beuerlein as the team trailed by double digits.

And then there was the 1992 NFL Draft.

The day before first-round picks were to be made, the Cowboys had reached out to the Cleveland Browns regarding a trade. Browns coach Bill Belichick agreed to the deal, but called Dallas to accept the terms after Jones had already gone home. So Johnson went public and announced the trade. The next day, Jones was upset that he hadn't been consulted and had a closed-door meeting with Johnson.

[Sports Illustrated's Peter King picks up the story](#) from there:

"Their meeting droned on until, with only five minutes left before the start of the draft, Jones told Johnson, 'You know the ESPN camera is in the draft room today. So whenever we're about to make a pick, you look at me, like we're talking about it.' In other words, *Make me look as if I'm a big player here, even though we all know I'm not making the picks.*"

Johnson stormed out of the room and shared several graphic descriptions of Jones with defensive coordinator Dave Wannstedt and director of player personnel Bob Ackles. The coach threatened to let Jones conduct the draft, even hinting that he might quit the team altogether. The staffers had to convince Johnson just to return to the team's war room.

A flirtation with another



Jan 31, 1993; Pasadena, CA, USA; FILE PHOTO; Dallas Cowboys head coach Jimmy Johnson before the start of Super Bowl XXVII against the Buffalo Bills at the Rose Bowl. The Cowboys defeated the Bills 52-17. Mandatory Credit: Photo By USA TODAY Sports © Copyright USA TODAY Sports

The infamous [Jacksonville episode](#) wounded Jones deeply. It came just before the Cowboys played the Giants in the final week of the 1993 regular season. The winner would claim the NFC East crown. In the lead-up to the must-win game, Johnson said in an ESPN interview that he would be “intrigued” by any interest from the new expansion club. The comment alone flaunted standard tampering rules; it certainly enraged his boss.

As King explains:

“Jones, upset at Johnson’s ill-timed remark, told the press that Jones and only Jones would decide Johnson’s coaching future. This made the strong-willed Johnson furious. On the team’s charter flight home after the win over the Giants, Johnson walked up to Jones and said, “By the way, I’m the one who’s going to decide how long I coach here.”

Despite the behind-the-scenes backbiting, Jones and Johnson drove their superstar roster to a combined 25-7 record over the 1993 and 1994 regular seasons, winning the Super Bowl both years in convincing fashion. The stage seemed set for a long dynastic run by the Cowboys. Privately, though, Jones already sensed a change was coming.

[ESPN The Magazine’s Don Van Natta, Jr.](#) chronicled the foreshadowing in 2014.

“Despondent, Jones visited his mother and father in Hot Springs, Arkansas, in early 1994 to seek their counsel. Johnson was threatening to bolt for the new franchise in Jacksonville, and most Dallas columnists were in the coach’s corner. ‘It’s eatin’ on me, it’s botherin’ me, it’s changin’ me,’ Jones told his folks. Pat Jones just said, ‘Come on, Jerry, be a man, live with it.’ His mother echoed that advice. And a longtime business partner, Mike McCoy, told Jones, ‘Are you getting what

you want from Jimmy?’ The answer, on the field, was yes. ‘Then live with it,’ Jones says McCoy told him. ‘Forget it. Use him.’

But Jones couldn’t do it.

“When I would be with him and we’d be charming and all that stuff, I just- I just couldn’t stand it,” Jones now says. “And I was just thinking, ‘It’s false.’”

It should not have been a surprise, then, when the long-ago-lit and slow-burning fuse touched off an explosion. But the way it actually blew up could never have been predicted.

Drama over drinks



Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, left, and coach Jimmy Johnson celebrate with the Super Bowl XXVIII trophy after defeating the Buffalo Bills 30-13 at Atlanta’s Georgia Dome, Jan. 30, 1994. At right is Cowboys’ Emmitt Smith. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

On March 21, management and staff from each NFL team were attending the league meetings in Orlando. ABC was throwing a party at Disney’s Pleasure Island to celebrate the 25th anniversary of *Monday Night Football*. Johnson and a table full of Cowboy employees and spouses were tipping back drinks and swapping work stories when Jones himself suddenly approached.

Unbeknownst to Jones, he was the subject of conversation before he arrived tableside.

An awkward hush fell amongst the group. With scouting director Larry Lacey by his side and his own drink in hand, Jones banged the table and made a loud, boisterous, self-serving toast.

“Here’s to the Dallas Cowboys, and here’s to the people who made it possible to win two Super Bowls!”

Johnson was with Wannstedt, by then head coach in Chicago, offensive coordinator Norv Turner, who had just been named head coach in Washington, their wives, and several other team staffers, more than one of whom were now ex-staffers after being fired by Jones.

Not one person joined Jones in his toast and the silence was deafening.

Johnson glared at Jones. The billionaire and his ego-enhancing praise were not welcome with this bunch. Jones slammed down his glass, offered a few choice profanities, and retreated back to the hotel bar at the Hyatt Grand Cypress.

That's where several reporters were enjoying their night. Among them were Ed Werder and Rick Gosselin of the *Dallas Morning News*. It was now in the wee hours of Tuesday morning, and soon, the beat writers began making their way back to their rooms. Jones reportedly tugged Werder by the pant leg and quietly offered a tantalizing scoop to him and Gosselin.

"Stick around and have a drink. You don't want to miss the story of the year."

Werder and Gosselin ditched the other reporters and circled back to the bar, where Jones laid out in an "off-the-record" talk that he was contemplating firing Johnson, who had secured a second straight league title for Jones just 51 days prior.

"I could step out and hire Barry Switzer as coach of the Dallas Cowboys tomorrow and he'd do a better job than Jimmy. Hell, I could probably get Lou Holtz over here. I might just step out tomorrow and hire either one of them."

The writers were dumbstruck. But Jerry had even more to say.

"I think there are five hundred people who could have coached this team to the Super Bowl. I really believe that. [Expletive], I could have coached the hell out of this team!"

The owner continued his rant for the two reporters. By the end of the conversation, Gosselin said, per Pearlman's book, "He was almost talking himself into firing Jimmy. He knew exactly what he was saying and what he was doing."

The morning after



Mark J. Rebilas-USA TODAY Sports

Still, the late-night curses of a tipsy billionaire in a hotel bar isn't enough to go to press. Gosselin and Werder met with Jones again over breakfast a few hours later to confirm the previous night's conversation.

Jones allowed the entire thing to go on the record.

Within minutes, Johnson himself found out what his boss had said. Lacewell had given the coach a heads-up on the story soon to break. In a chance meeting with Dolphins coach Don Shula, Johnson said in a hotel hallway, "I think I've just been fired." Johnson bolted Orlando and drove to his home in the Florida Keys.

By the next day, March 23, Johnson had gone public with a statement in which he said he would have to "pull back and reassess things" regarding his future with the Cowboys after learning that Jones had threatened to fire him.

At a thrown-together press conference back at the hotel, Jones said there was nothing for Johnson to assess. He refused to issue an apology, calling the episode "just another day in the life of the Dallas Cowboys."

But the next few days were surreal, even by the soap-opera standards of America's Team.

Johnson pleaded his case in the media, saying, "I'm not the greatest in the world to get along with. I know I'm arrogant. I know I'm self-serving. But somebody please tell me what I've done wrong... What have I done so wrong to be ripped the way I have? To my mind, I just got to the pinnacle of my profession. What did I do wrong?"

Jones defended his hypothetical-coaching-change stance, arguing, "My job is to stay ahead of the game. The future always begins tomorrow. If I'm not considering it, no one is. My *job* is the future of the Dallas Cowboys."

Both sides were digging in as divorce talks grew louder. And the players were the kids caught in the middle, being asked to choose sides.

Emmitt Smith supported his coach over the owner he had previously done battle with in a contract standoff. "The team would be in turmoil to lose the head coach over some bull after he won two Super Bowls. I don't understand popping off like that," Smith said. Later, he would be even more emphatic: "If you fire Jimmy, fire me."

Aikman tried to remain neutral at first. "I really have no gut feeling about what's going to happen," he said. As the drama unfolded with no resolution, though, he revealed how deep the ripple effects went, ominously stating, "If I could have anticipated something like this happening, I would have been hesitant about signing a long-term contract."

Jones and Johnson finally met again on March 28. According to King:

"We came up with five options," said Johnson. "Number one, fire me, which we eliminated. Number two, I quit, which we eliminated. Number three, I continue to work under my existing contract, which we eliminated. Number four was to settle the contract and part. The fifth was to put all our efforts into one year. I even said I'd change the language in my contract, [which specified] that I had sole control of all personnel moves. Then after one year I'd be free to go where I wanted."

The notion of the first-ever three-peat was alluring to both men. It might even make the headaches and bruised egos worthwhile. Jones and Johnson were former teammates, even former road-game roommates- while at Arkansas. They had been through the franchise's darkest days together and come out on top of the mountain with a legitimate chance now to do something that had never been done before. Both men were leaning toward the Fifth Option: Put aside all differences for one last season and shoot for indisputable football immortality.

All it took to sour that grand plan was a newspaper headline a few hours later.

D-day



(Photo by Jonathan Daniel/Getty Images)

Tuesday morning, March 29, on his way into the team complex to bury the hatchet and finalize the deal that would keep him in place as coach, Johnson spotted the front page of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. It read, “JERRY TO JIMMY: COMMIT OR QUIT.”

Johnson viewed the paper as Jones’s own mouthpiece; if the paper printed it, it’s because Jerry must have said it.

Johnson marched into Jones’s office having done a complete about-face. He looked at Jones and said, “It’s time.”

But Jones already knew that. He had made a phone call the day before to Barry Switzer.

Jones and Johnson decided to tear up Johnson’s contract with five years still remaining on it. Johnson was effectively a free agent. Jones also gave Johnson a \$2 million severance bonus.

Then the pair walked out in front of the assembled press for what was described as an “awkward” press conference by one, “fraudulent” by another, and even “a lickfest” as Jones and Johnson each heaped feigned praise on the other until the obligatory media event was over.

The divorce was final.

Johnson went home and sobbed.

Jones received death threats.

Barry Switzer was introduced as the Cowboys' new coach the next day. It had been just nine days since Johnson ignored Jones's toast at Pleasure Island.

Still friends?



(Photo by Joe Robbins/Getty Images)

Despite Johnson's claim during that parting press conference that, "I feel better today about Jerry Jones as a friend than I have our entire friendship," that warm-and-fuzzy tone didn't stick.

Jones told Johnson then that he'd ask him for advice moving forward. In 2014, the 20th anniversary of their split, **Johnson told Tim Cowlishaw** of the *Dallas Morning News*, "Do you want to know how many time Jerry or Stephen have called me in 20 years for advice or to ask about a player? Zero. And yet they call Lacewell."

"Disloyalty," **Jones said that same year**, referring to Johnson's taking credit for what Jones considers front office business. "I couldn't handle the disloyalty. Whether it was right or not, by every measurement you can go, I had paid so many times a higher price to get there than he had paid, it was unbelievable."

Johnson responded by calling Jones "a rich [expletive]."

But Jones still owns the team, and by extension, significant control of the legacy. The names of Aikman, Smith, Michael Irvin, Darren Woodson, and Charles Haley are up there in the stadium, but Johnson has yet to be placed in the team's Ring of Honor.

"It certainly has been more of a negative for me than it was for him," Jones told Van Natta. Their split "caused him to never have won but two Super Bowls!" Jones says, practically shouting. "I don't give a [expletive] what it is, but it caused one thing for him: He'll never win but two! I've won three! And I may get to win five more!"

"I lost my tolerance of having an associate, a friend, not be loyal. I've been told, 'That's trite. You should be bigger than that.' I mean, really: am I so dumb that I don't know you don't fire a coach after y'all just won two straight Super Bowls?"

In the end, though, all that talk of the pair's "friendship" may have simply been part of the facade they created for the world. Kevin Sherrington of the [Dallas Morning News revealed](#) the reason Johnson and Jones had been Razorback roommates for away games? Alphabetical.

Still, though, now 26 years after the divorce, there remains the possibility of reconciliation.

Jones and Johnson both made efforts in 2017 to extend an olive branch at a 25-year reunion of the 1992 Super Bowl team thrown by Aikman.

During [his Hall of Fame speech](#) that same year, Jones made it a point to thank Johnson:

"I wanted someone I knew, I wanted someone I knew well. I wanted someone that could get it done to be our coach. I wanted Jimmy Johnson. I said he'd be worth five first-round draft choices or five Heisman Trophy winners. Of course, I sure did get laughed out of town when I said it. It was my first experience as an owner and general manager making a difficult and very unpopular decision. Jimmy, it was a great decision.

"You were a great teammate, you were a great partner. To the contrary of popular belief, we worked so well together for five years and restored the Cowboys' credibility with our fans. We were back to back, we were driven, we had thick skin, we took all the criticism they could dish out. I thank you."

Last best chance at reconciliation



(Photo by Kevork Djansezian/Getty Images)

Now that Johnson, too, has been [chosen for enshrinement in Canton](#) the chance exists once again for the two to patch things up publicly. Jones seized the moment of Johnson's selection to engineer an appearance by the Cowboys in the Hall of Fame Game.

"When we learned that Jimmy Johnson would be involved in the August ceremony in Canton, we approached the Hall of Fame and expressed a strong interest in being a part of honoring his legacy and induction by bringing our team and Cowboys fans to Canton." – [via Darrin Grant, Pro Football Talk](#)

Jones has taken several opportunities in recent years to reflect on the way his relationship with Johnson crashed and burned. And the role he played in fanning the flames.

"I lost my tolerance for a lot of things I probably should have tolerated," Jones told KTCK-AM 1310 The Ticket in 2016. "I probably should have had a little more tolerance with Jimmy Johnson. Seriously."

Van Natta wrote Jones "teetered between rage and sorrow" as he recounted the events of two decades prior, sometimes blaming himself for the falling out with Johnson. "I should have exercised tolerance and patience," Jones mused. "I did not."

Jones even looks back on that fateful night in Orlando with a clearer perspective. According to those at the table that night, Johnson was in the middle of retelling the story of the 1992 draft and Jones' demands Johnson play to the ESPN cameras when Jones appeared to make his disastrous toast.

Jones confessed to Peter King that he doesn't remember asking Johnson to pretend to consult him about draft picks. "But if that's the story they were telling when I approached their table," Jones told King, "now I know why they all looked so sheepish."

As for the "five hundred coaches" quote that was the shot heard 'round the league and maybe the straw that broke the camel's back?

According to the Ron St. Angelo and Norm Hitzges book *Greatest Team Ever: The Dallas Cowboys Dynasty of the 1990s*, Jones now regrets the remark and understands the impact of the message it may have sent to Johnson.

"If you've spent any time around me, you know I express myself in hyperbole. 'He threw the ball a thousand yards,' saying things that way... I really to this day am amazed that anybody would look at that and say, 'Well, did Jerry actually think there were five hundred people that could coach that team?... But I think it [the statement] did offend him. That was a mistake. I shouldn't have said that. But I felt that strongly about the personnel of the team we had put together."

Nomadic Ways



LOS ANGELES, CA – DECEMBER 19: Jimmie Johnson arrives at the CBS "Survivor: Nicaragua" Finale and Reunion Party at CBS Television City on December 19, 2010 in Los Angeles, California. (Photo by Michael Buckner/Getty Images)

For his part, Johnson has claimed the quip played no role in the breakup.

"I was leaving anyway," Johnson said in a 2006 revelation. "I had already written down the actual date I was going to resign in my personal itinerary. It was just a few weeks away, before the draft. I was just going to say, 'I'm gone.'"

According to Cowlshaw's piece, Johnson started losing interest toward the end of the 1992 season, as it became clear that his coaching staff would be poached by other teams. After never coaching anywhere for longer than five years, Johnson's reputation was as a coach who comes in and *builds* from scratch. He doesn't *rebuild*.

"If Johnson had to build a new staff," Cowlshaw writes, "he didn't want to do it in Dallas where anything short of Super Bowl victory would hang in the air like defeat. He wanted a fresh start with the expansion team in Jacksonville, which was as close as he could get to his beloved south Florida at the time."

In fact, at the Orlando meetings in 1994, Johnson had just come off a long Florida fishing vacation. With just a month to go before the draft, he hadn't looked at tape on a single player.

"This wasn't a coach thinking about history or legacies," according to Cowlshaw. "This was a man in search of the nearest fire escape."

While it's easy to cast Johnson as the slick talker with the cushy TV job and the fishing boat, the carefree soul who walked away from an intense marriage and now says he never cared that much, that's not the truth either. Watch [the footage of him receiving his invitation to the Hall of Fame](#). Those tears are genuine. What he did in Dallas meant something. For a time, it meant everything.

And the fact that he's not in the team's Ring of Honor?

"I think he'd say it's not important for him to go into the Ring of Honor," Aikman has stated, "but I know that's not accurate."

NFL fans and popular culture ate up the Jones/Johnson feud while it was happening. It continues to make headlines every time someone reveals another tidbit about who said what to whom or how one of them undercut the other. Even though the marriage itself was short-lived, it produced something lasting and special in the annals of pro football. Jerry and Jimmy will always be linked by what they accomplished alongside one another.

They'll soon be roommates once again in the bust gallery in Canton. And for many Cowboys players and fans of that generation, the only thing nearly as sweet as another Super Bowl victory will be the day when Jones and Johnson make peace with each other for real... and make good on a promise from the day they divorced.

"We have mutually agreed that if we don't look out," Jones said at that awkward 1994 press conference, [according to Mark Heisler of the LA Times](#), "we'll take one of the greatest stories that's ever been told in sports, in my view, and we'll take all the positives away. There are no negatives when you really look at it."

But until Jerry Jones and Jimmy Johnson find a way to let bygones truly be bygones, there is still a negative when Cowboys fans look back on the two men's shared rise to glory.

"We don't let our egos get in the way of the ball club," Aikman said after Johnson's departure from the team. "We understand that sometimes you have to suppress your own selfish desires to benefit the team. Maybe that is something Jimmy and Jerry never understood and were never capable of understanding."