

JIMMY JOHNSON ONLY WANTS TO BE IN CONTROL-TOTALLY

Saturday, September 20, 1992

By Barry Horn and Dallas Morning News
Republished on chicagotribune.com



DALLAS - This is the house that Jimmy Johnson built, where he demands the outside world never set foot:

Three bedrooms, two stories. Two big-screen TVs-one downstairs in the den, one upstairs in the master bedroom.

Satellite dish, swimming pool, Jacuzzi. Seven saltwater fish tanks-three in the kitchen, four in the den.

All for the pleasure of its sole occupant.

Professionally, Jimmy Johnson is consumed with winning a Super Bowl. It has become his most ardent passion. He has spent a coaching lifetime doggedly working toward his goal. Being the best. It is all that really matters. In the minutes he does devote to a private life, he desperately wants to be left alone.

Nothing personal, world. It's just that Jimmy Johnson thinks you get enough seeing him on the sidelines, listening in at news conferences, watching his television show, second-guessing his decisions, poking him for autographs at the supermarket. He figures seven-day work weeks, 14-hour workdays earn him whatever solitude he can escape to.

It is his fourth year as Dallas Cowboys coach, and the city knows little more about Johnson off the field than it did when he arrived.

It's not that he has anything he wants to hide. It's simply that he would rather not be bothered. It's his life, he'll live it on his own terms.

"At home, I want it all to stop," Jimmy Johnson says, seated behind his desk at the Cowboys' Valley Ranch headquarters.

And so it does.

Above all else, Johnson is in control. He demands it. He insists that he always be in total control of everything he comes in contact with-his team, his relationships, his life.

"If I don't think I am in control," he says, "I don't want to be around it or have it around me."

No one enters Jimmy Johnson's house except by invitation.

Even those who know the 49-year-old coach best know better than to unexpectedly cross his threshold.

"He's moody, the moodiest man I know," says girlfriend Rhonda Rookmaaker, who spends more time in the house with Johnson than anyone.

"That's why he likes to live by himself and be by himself."

Johnson and his ex-wife, Linda Kay, the college sweetheart he married in 1963, divorced soon after arriving in Dallas in 1989.

"More than anything, I wanted to live alone," Johnson said. "That is the way it was. That is the way it will be."

This is the house where Jimmy Johnson lives, one traffic light and 1.2 miles from where he works in Valley Ranch as coach of the Cowboys.

There is white carpet inside the house that Jimmy Johnson decorated. There is a lavish formal dining room where no one has ever eaten. There is a tastefully furnished living room where he never sits. There are guest bedrooms, where the master of the house prefers no one sleep.

There is not a crumb in the kitchen, where a hand-held vacuum is never far from reach. Upstairs in the closet in the master bedroom, shirts, just back from the dry cleaner, are arranged by color-whites, then blues, then stripes. Not a hair out of place in the master bath.

"Everybody should be organized," Johnson says. "I like everything planned, mapped out. I don't like being haphazard.

The telephone rarely rings in the house where Jimmy Johnson retreats. Even rarer does he answer it. That's what answering machines are for.

Johnson hates to talk on the phone and despises small talk. A handful of people know the number. Most who do know better than to use it.

"Jimmy would rather we call him at the office," says C.W. Johnson of Port Arthur, Texas, Jimmy's daddy.

"Doesn't matter, really," adds Allene Johnson, who has taken to completing her husband's thoughts after 53 years of marriage. "Jimmy says as little as he has to."

Only blue damsels and coral bandits and shrimp and lion fish share Jimmy Johnson's home away from the fish bowl that is the eternal home of the coach of the Dallas Cowboys.

On a preseason morning two weeks ago, Johnson, in his Valley Ranch office, has been answering questions about his life, his family, and his relationships while juggling deal-making telephone calls that hours later will send defensive back Garry Lewis to Tampa Bay and bring pass rushing specialist Charles Haley from San Francisco.

Only when the discussion turns to his fish does Johnson appear to get excited.

"Have you got some time? I'll show you," the coach says as he comes around the desk, heading for the door.

Gliding past his secretary, who reminds that team owner Jerry Jones needs to speak to the coach, Johnson, talking a foreign fish language, heads for his black, two-seat Nissan 300ZX.

Less than five minutes later, he is grinning, watching his lion fish devour some unsuspecting fellow traveler and explaining how clown fish and sea anemone rely on each other to stay alive.

His hobby, Jimmy Johnson says, makes him truly happy.

"Very relaxing," he calls it.

"The fish-they may be the perfect things for him to have around the house," says son Brent Johnson. "If he had a dog or a cat they might bug him, expect something from him in return. The fish-they don't want to know him. They leave him alone."

Really, WHO is he?

Who is this fiercely independent Jimmy Johnson, coach of the Dallas Cowboys and undisputed master of his own universe who in the course of two interviews, including a rare five-hour session in his home, declares that he: - Refuses to allow anyone to get too close to him because that could mean losing control of the relationship.

- Demands undivided, blind loyalty from those who work for him, friends and family.

- Doesn't like being in the company of "outsiders," his way of saying strangers.

- Only has a "few inside the circle," his way of saying he feels close to only five people-sons Brent, 28, and Chad, 25; Rookmaaker, a hair stylist; his Miami attorney Nick Christin; and longtime assistant Dave Wannstedt.

- Hesitates to define his relationship with owner Jones, who says he is "arguably as close as anyone" to Johnson. "Sometimes," responds Johnson, "it's hard to say what your relationships are to people because people get offended."

- Enjoys dusting, vacuuming, doing laundry, drawing up shopping lists and searching for bargains at the supermarket.

- Will buy things he doesn't need or even like, such as asparagus, at the supermarket if he thinks it's a good deal and then call friends and acquaintances to see if they can use it.
- Hates jokes, idle conversation and procrastinators.
- Gets so impatient in traffic that he will drive on the shoulder to keep from sitting still.
- Can't remember the last Thanksgiving, Christmas or birthday he celebrated with his sons.
- Enjoyed his happiest moment ever on the football field, his University of Miami team's victory over Oklahoma for the 1987 national championship.
- Lived in the same house as his two sons but was so consumed by work that he barely saw and never knew them while they were growing up.
- Feels closer than ever to his sons now that they are men and he at long last has learned to feel comfortable with them, his friends.
- Regrets nothing.

He warns against drawing any conclusions.

"Most people think they know me," says Johnson. "I like it to be that way. Let them think.

"But I can't let people really know me. I don't want people to ever know me well enough to predict what I will do.

"That way, I always remain in control."

Psychology

C.W. Johnson says James William-the middle of his three children who always has been called Jimmy-"has always wanted to be the best at anything he did since he was a child and worked hard to get there."

Seated across the den from her husband in their Port Arthur, Texas, home that is dotted with autographed photos of her famous son, Allene Johnson is quick to add, "Jimmy has always been particular about his things and always wanting to go by the book."

Young Jimmy Johnson loved to play cards and Monopoly but couldn't stand it when his mother, father, sister or brother took a game less than seriously. Jimmy usually won. "If he weren't smart enough to win by outthinking everyone, he wouldn't play," says C.W.

The Johnson family migrated from Arkansas to Port Arthur, about 100 miles east of Houston, 50 years ago after C.W. found mechanic's work at an oil refinery. C.W. didn't like the work and took a job instead as plant superintendent at the Townsend Dairy.

Perhaps it was from the hard-working C.W. that Jimmy Johnson learned there was no end to the workday.

The dairy's owner demanded that his superintendent live in a company-owned house on company land and remain on-call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. "Jimmy saw sometimes you had to put your job first," C.W. says. "It probably stuck with him."

Most Port Arthur boys knew steady paychecks and stable futures awaited them at the big Gulf and Texaco refineries. Jimmy Johnson, who starred at Thomas Jefferson High School, knew he had no interest in dairies or refineries.

Instead, he accepted a football scholarship at the University of Arkansas, in the state where, as a boy, he spent summers on his grandparents' farm in Clarksville.

At Arkansas, Johnson played football, studied when he had to and hustled bridge.

In the summer after his sophomore season, he married Linda Kay Cooper of Marked Tree, Ark., whom he had known for six months. The next year, Brent was born.

Bridge brought money to help the fledgling family. Johnson played mornings instead of going to class.

"Bridge is a game of strategy. You have to be analytical, figure out what cards other people have," he says. "Even if you have worse cards, you can win. That was part of the attraction for me."

Playing regularly in the student union with "a bunch of guys who looked like Maynard G. Krebs," the football player who would grow into an all-Southwest Conference lineman by his senior season in 1964 could pick up \$40 to \$50 for a morning's work.

Johnson, a psychology major, had no plans to stay in the football business after graduation. He thought about getting a master's degree and going to work for a large corporation as an industrial psychologist.

But then the husband and father of one, who would soon have a second child, was offered an assistant coaching job at Louisiana Tech because of his amazing grasp of the game. The pay was \$1,000 a month. Not bad for 1965.

Johnson and coaching-the honeymoon never has ended. Less than a year later, he knew he had found his calling.

"It was like bridge, only better," he says. "There was X's and O's strategy, but it wasn't only that. The challenge was to get players emotionally into practice and games. It was rewarding to me to take players and challenge them mentally. We could use strategy and psychology and take players who weren't as good as the other team's and win.

"Winning like that was fun."

Single Focus

His rapture with college football left Jimmy Johnson little time for his family.

"Linda Kay was fantastic in raising the children," he says. "Me, I was working."

From Louisiana Tech, Johnson and family moved to Picayune, Miss., for a year of high school coaching. Then it was on to assistant coaching positions at Wichita State, Iowa State, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Pittsburgh.

In 1979, he was named head coach at Oklahoma State, perennial poor sister to the University of Oklahoma, and built a program. In 1984, he graduated to what he would make one of the highest-profile college coaching jobs in the country-the University of Miami.

"The only way I could have gotten there and then to this point in my life is to have lived the way I did," Johnson says.

Or, rather, worked the way he did-relentlessly.

Johnson's sons say that meant living in the same house as their father but not seeing him for weeks. And when they did see him, there was little conversation.

"It's different from how I hear a normal family works," says son Chad.

Jimmy Johnson never enjoyed a Thanksgiving meal with his family, never celebrated Christmas, never exchanged gifts with his family. Traditions that continue to this day.

"I don't remember when I stopped really paying attention to those things," says Johnson, who spent his time building a career, coaching, recruiting and glad-handing alumni. There was always a game plan to devise, a recruit to see, a bowl game for which to prepare.

"Growing up, my mother was always there for us," says son Brent. "In order to accomplish what he has, he put everything else aside, including his family. I can understand that now, and Chad understands. My dad and I are friends now, but we didn't know each other for a very long time."

Both sons say they have grown to accept their father's ways. They understand that it is football and winning that drive their father. But it is no coincidence that both live in Dallas. It is since he has become coach of the Cowboys that they have become closer.

"That's him," says Brent. "You accept him as he is or lose him."

Johnson is proud of his sons. Brent is a University of Texas law school graduate who is trying to make it as a fashion model, and Chad is a stockbroker.

Neither of Johnson's sons is surprised that their father's devotion to his work helped break up their parents' marriage. They say it was long obvious that their parents, married when Jimmy was 20 and Linda Kay was 21, had grown apart.

Linda Kay, who has spent the summer living and teaching school in Venezuela, loves to travel. Jimmy loves to stay home.

Linda Kay loves socializing, loves going to fancy restaurants. Jimmy loves staying home watching football or going for a beer with his assistant coaches.

"For a long time they had the kids," says Brent. "And then when they lived in Miami before coming to Dallas, they had Miami," he says. "They both loved Miami. They loved living there, even if they didn't do things together. But when they came to Dallas, they didn't have anything anymore."

Johnson says he had no reason to want to be married in Dallas where the job description was different and his time would be devoted totally to the business of football.

College coaches need wives. NFL coaches don't.

Know Thy Frenemy?

No explanations have been necessary in Dallas. Professional football is easier to deal with than the college version. No alumni to answer to. No college presidents. No recruits who have to be wined, dined and won over.

Cowboys owner Jerry Jones says he thought he knew his former college teammate when he hired Johnson. "But I didn't know he was so eaten up with football. The intensity is more than I expected, more than I could have hoped for."

Jones and Johnson played on the same Arkansas teams, roomed together on nights before games and enjoyed each other's company. But they spent little time together away from football and rarely socialized. "I can't think of any close friends Jimmy had on the team," says Jones.

Jones thinks long and hard when the subject is Johnson, seeking the right words, massaging quotes, asking for permission to reword sentences. Johnson has no such problem in talking about Jones. He never hesitates. Sometimes it is difficult to tell who is the boss and who is the employee.

"Do I know Jimmy Johnson?" says the man who some have painted as his Siamese twin since their joint arrival in Dallas, repeating a question.

"Let's just say," Jones answers after more than 30 seconds of silence,

"I know as much as I'm comfortable with and need to know. I don't think anyone really knows Jimmy Johnson."

- - -

The Philadelphia Eagles, one of the Cowboys' division rivals in the NFC East, are playing the New York Jets on the big screen in Jimmy Johnson's den on the evening he has cracked open his front door.

Those who know Johnson best say this is truly his favorite way to relax. Football on the television, pulled into the den by the satellite dish on the other side of the wall, a Heineken in his hand and Rookmaaker in a nearby chair. As much as anything, Rookmaaker is Johnson's buddy. She enjoys football and drinking beer from the bottle. And staying home. She is not timid about trading one-liners with him. She has been, say Johnson's sons, very good for their father.

She has brought laughter and good times to the house that the coach calls home.

Johnson always refers to himself as selfish and egotistical. Rookmaaker bristles at the adjectives she considers misleading. He is selfish only with his time, she says. There are always gifts for her, for the sons, for the family, for his assistant coaches. That they never come on birthdays or Christmas is Johnson being Johnson, which means being different.

Minutes later, Johnson, back from work, is talking about the Eagles and jumping up to try to force his favorite song, Texas A & M's "Aggie War Hymn," through the built-in speakers in the wall.

"James," Rookmaaker says, "sit down and behave."

If Johnson hears her, above the blaring of the brass, he doesn't show it. The den is filled with family photos. There is Jimmy and his sons. There is Jimmy and his parents and brother and sister. There are Brent and Chad with boxer Sugar Ray Leonard. There is a picture of boxer Marvelous Marvin Hagler, framed alongside a telegram from the former middleweight champion of the world. Johnson loves boxing. It is his favorite spectator sport. The office, a million miles away at Cowboys headquarters, is sterile and businesslike. Here, there is evidence that Johnson may not want the world to see: something other than football may matter.

"Just understand one thing," Jimmy Johnson says before closing his front door for the night. "The only way I could have gotten to this point in my life is to have lived it the way I did.

"And that, like everything, comes with a price."