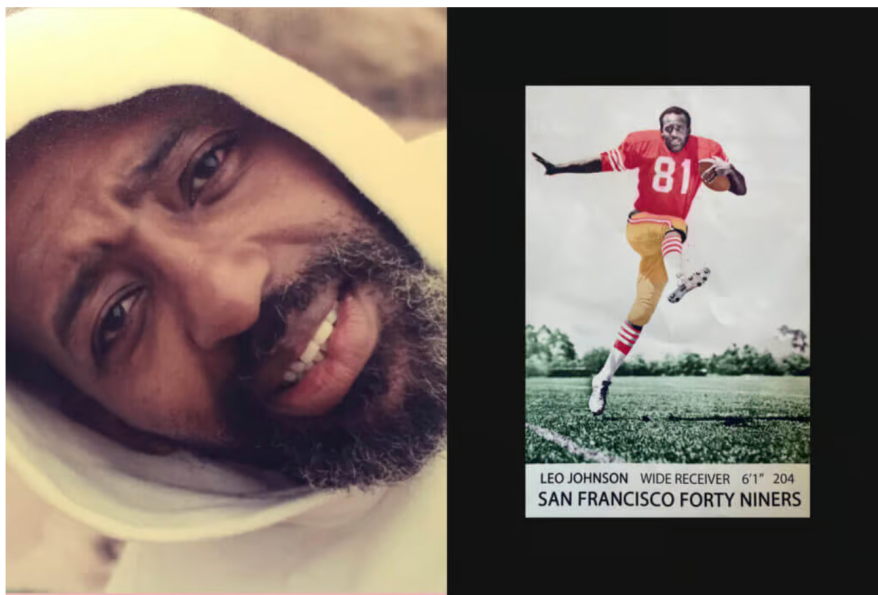


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For the 49ers, Leo Johnson was family — even if you don't remember him



By Daniel Brown 8h ago

11

They are the headline names, of course. Steve Young, Jeff Garcia, [Alex Smith](#) and [Brock Purdy](#) will take the stage at the Dwight Clark Legacy Series event in San Jose, Calif., on Thursday because nobody puts Bay Area fans in the seats like [San Francisco 49ers](#) quarterbacks.

But the most important [49ers](#) player to know on Thursday, a symbol of why this event exists, is a roster blip from over 50 years ago.

Leo Johnson (listed as “Lee” [in the record books](#)) played for the 49ers in 1969 and ’70. The sixth-round pick out of Tennessee State University totaled four catches for 42 yards. His career stat line was essentially a decent half for Jerry Rice.

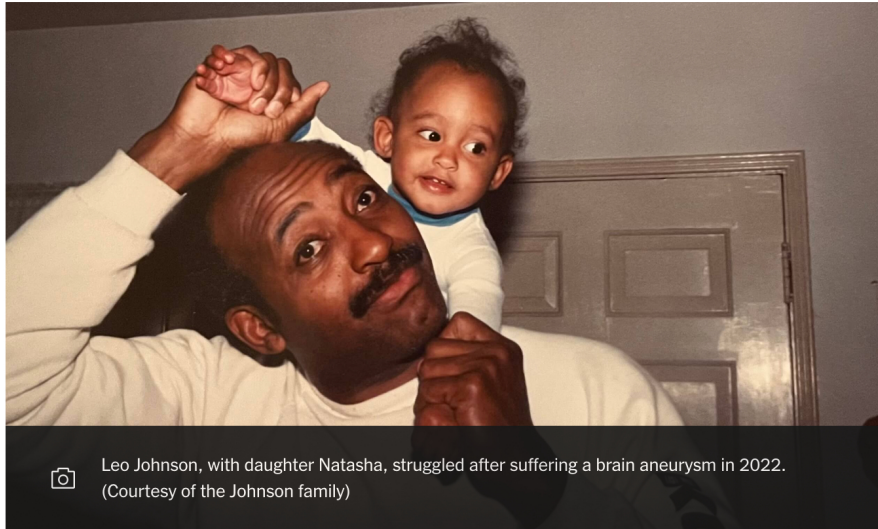
That you have never heard of Leo Johnson is the point. That he lived in football obscurity is why the [Dwight Clark Legacy Series](#) was launched in the first place.

"This is a fund about helping our family," said former 49ers linebacker Ron Ferrari, the chairman of the Golden Heart Fund.

Johnson, a native Texan, was 78 in 2022 when he suffered a brain aneurysm and wound up in a cruel and confusing maze of assisted living facilities. “He had congenital heart failure. High blood pressure. He had odds stacked against him,” his wife, Kristen said. Leo’s torment included a brief stop at a

skilled nursing facility in Los Altos where the family says Johnson was mistreated amid squalor and neglect.

“Everything you would imagine in a horror film about a nursing home,” Natasha Johnson, his daughter said.



Leo Johnson, with daughter Natasha, struggled after suffering a brain aneurysm in 2022.
(Courtesy of the Johnson family)

Kristen, who was with Leo for 47 years (married for 38), compared it to “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest,” complete with a staff of [Nurse Ratcheds](#). She said the floors were filthy, the walls smeared with who-knows-what and the food unservable. Kristen said the nurses were so inept that they fed a sugary dessert to Leo, a diabetic.

“They had an older woman, who was on the floor naked except for a diaper. She’d slipped out of her wheelchair,” Kristen recalled. “She was screaming ‘Help me! Help me!’ So we ran over to (a staffer) and the guy said, ‘Nah, she’ll just fall out again. Just leave her where she is.’”

Kristen and Natasha moved quickly, calling 911 to extricate Leo to a better facility in Mountain View, but new challenges awaited. Leo was only periodically conscious and clinging to life, but mounting costs after a month-long stay meant he was facing an involuntary discharge.



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“They said, ‘He can stay here but he’s going to have to pay \$600 a day,’” Natasha recalled. “And they said, ‘You’re lucky we gave you a week until you were discharged but on that day, you’ve got to go.’”

This was a financial wallop for the family. Natasha said that when she tells people her dad used to play for the 49ers, they assume they’re rich. But she said her dad made \$50,000, give or take, in his day. After football, Leo worked as a public safety officer at Stanford University and as a deputy for the Santa Clara County Sheriff’s Department, among other jobs.

“I was in a panic,” Kristen said of the financial burden. “How am I going to get through this? Where are we going to go?”

Kristen had been unaware of the Golden Heart Fund, and even if she’d known about it she would never dreamed that Leo qualified for its support. But Leo’s dear friend Delvin Williams, a 49ers running back from 1974 to ’78, encouraged her to reach out.

That’s when, at the worst of this family ordeal, a group led by some of the 49ers’ more famous names rode to the rescue.

Ronnie Lott and other greats did not ask how long Johnson played for the 49ers.

Brent Jones did not ask how many catches he had.

Harris Barton did not ask if Johnson played on any of the Super Bowl teams.

Instead, those Golden Heart Fund board members learned only that Johnson once wore the same red-and-gold uniform they did and that he was in distress. That was all they needed to know. The fund is open to players who spent at least one accredited season with the 49ers.

The Golden Heart Fund took it from there, helping Leo find a proper new assisted living facility, paying off the remainder of that \$600-a-day bill and checking in frequently on Kristen and Natasha. The fund’s assistance is free and confidential.

“Our value proposition is more speed and less bureaucracy,” said Killjan Anderson, the executive director of the Golden Heart Fund. “We convened a call and I said, ‘Here’s what we got: a guy looking at an involuntary discharge.’ And they’re like, ‘Do it!’

“Help was on the way within 24 hours.”

Anderson is not a former player, but he spent 21 years in the Air Force and once served as the executive director of the [Pat Tillman Foundation](#). He said he recognizes similar lifelong tribalism among soldiers and athletes.

“It’s like, ‘That’s my brother,’ It’s the same thing as military,” Anderson said. “If I meet a guy or a gal they say, ‘Oh, I was in the Navy,’ then the conversation changes. We’ve got that shared experience. Anytime you do something really hard with someone, the bond’s different.”

Leo Johnson died on March 26, 2023, but did so in a comfortable home and with his family at peace. In the months that followed, the Golden Heart Fund team helped Kristen and Natasha navigate the byzantine bureaucracy that follows a death in the family, including arranging for the [NFL](#) to pay for his cremation services.

Later that fall, Kristen, Natasha and Anderson reflected on the saga during an emotional lunch at Sundance Steakhouse in Palo Alto, one of Leo’s favorite spots.



“I’m not a religious person, at all,” Kristen said. “But I really feel like all the stars aligned, *everything* aligned. I felt like I’d been given a life, because honest to God, I had no idea how I was going to make payments. If he hadn’t been taken care of, it would be beyond awful.”

This is precisely what Lott and others had in mind when they created the Golden Heart Fund.

Past players had been kicking around the idea for a few years, but the galvanizing moment took place during the Hall of Fame induction week for Eddie DeBartolo Jr. in 2016.

On the eve of the ceremony, the 49ers threw a big bash for the beloved former owner, and all the former 49ers players were invited. But at some point during the revelry, players looked around the room and realized how many people weren’t there. It took only a few phone calls to learn how many 49ers suffered debilitating hardships after football.

The DeBartolo family helped seed the fund with a \$1 million donation and Dr. John York followed suit with another \$1 million. Each of those ownership families, the DeBartolos (past) and Yorks (present) continue to have a designated representative on the board.

“I don’t think the public really understands it,” Barton, a two-time All-Pro during the 49ers dynasty, said at the news conference in 2016 announcing the fund. “When the game ends is typically when the issues begin. Sometimes financially, but a lot of times emotionally and psychologically. Players out of the league for 15 years tend to be forgotten and tend to start having issues. Most times, players don’t know where to go to seek help.”

Dwight Clark, who died of ALS in 2018, understood the power of the Golden Heart Fund. The annual event named in honor of the man behind [“The Catch”](#) serves as the organization’s biggest fundraiser. It generated \$200,000 at last year’s gala.



GO DEEPER

'When he came down in bounds, the place went berserk; I mean, it exploded':
Recollections of The Catch from those who were there

Jesse Sapolu, the former 49ers offensive lineman, embraces the mission. At another event, the [Golden Heart Run](#) in October, he told the crowd: “You were with us when we were out there putting our health on the line trying to bring the Lombardi home. But you are also with us as our lives continue and our careers are over. ... Obviously, we are human beings and some of our brothers need our help.”

Kristen met Leo several years after his playing career. Not long ago, she came across an old ad for a [Donald Byrd and the Black Byrds](#) concert on May 19, 1976. She and her roommate attended the concert and afterward met Kristen’s roommate’s boyfriend, who worked with Leo at the Stanford Police Department. Kristen saw Leo from across the room. How could she not? He was wearing pink salmon-colored pants as he headed for the exits.

“I didn’t see his face,” Kristen said. “I saw him from behind as he walked out the door.”

The following weekend, the roommate’s boyfriend brought a friend to introduce to Kristen. Those memorable legs, she said, “walked in through my front door. And, literally, from that first night, we were together for 47 years.”

They had two children together, Natasha and Darius. Natasha still savors the long bike rides with her dad, a tradition that continued into his 70s. When she was a girl though, she emulated following in her father’s footsteps.

“I wanted to be an NFL player,” Natasha said. “I was a tomboy and I would play football with the boys at lunch. And I would whup ass. I’m not going to lie.”

Darius did follow in Leo’s footsteps, as a standout football player at Gunn High School who also excelled in soccer, basketball and baseball. Darius became a professional chef who still uses his dad’s recipe for barbecued ribs.

Somehow, though, Leo’s football lineage got jumbled up in family and multiple friends’ lore. Many have lived under the impression that Leo played for the 49ers longer than he did before playing for the [Chicago Bears](#) and [Minnesota Vikings](#). Neither the Bears nor the Vikings list him on their all-time roster. He is listed on the roster of the 1974 Houston Texas of the World Football League.

The confusion could stem from some combination of training camp or tryout experience. Whatever the mystery, it added a layer of complication to sorting out Leo’s benefits as an NFL alum.

“I feel like I lived with a ghost,” Kristen said. “Really, to this day, my mind is blown.”

But his time with the 49ers? You could look it up. He played 21 games (zero

starts) in San Francisco. In his best game, Johnson caught three passes for 37 yards from quarterback Steve Spurrier in a 10-7 road loss to the Vikings on [Dec. 14, 1969](#).

So let the record reflect that, a half-century ago, Johnson made some catches for the 49ers.

And that the 49ers never let go.

“We wouldn’t be here right now if it hadn’t been for the fund,” Kristen said. “I mean, I don’t know where we’d be living — literally. It was truly miraculous.”

(Top photos of Leo Johnson courtesy of the Johnson family and San Francisco 49ers)

What did you think of this story?



MEH



SOLID



AWESOME



Daniel Brown is a staff editor/writer for The Athletic MLB. He began covering Bay Area sports in 1995, including stints as a beat writer covering the Giants and 49ers. His feature story on Sergio Romo and a young cancer patient won first place in feature writing from the Associated Press Sports Editors in 2015. He is a native of Cotati, Calif., and a graduate of UC Davis. Follow Daniel on Twitter [@BrownieAthletic](#)

COMMENTS

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11 Comments

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Sam R. · 7h 1m ago

This is awesome

11 ...

Rogers A. · 6h 36m ago

Outstanding work by the Niners.

Let it also be said that Ronnie Lott has done many things to assist former players from all NFL teams in getting medical assistance post career. I can't recall the name of the organization, but he is a leader in it. I recall reading about it in The Athletic, and less than a month later listening to a former Buffalo Bills player talk specifically how it helped get care at a more reasonable price than he had previously gotten.


11 ...

Darren G. · 5h 48m ago

Great article, and a moving story. I had no idea about this fund and it's one of the many great things about the 49ers organization.

That said, I'm guessing that, "Our value is proposition and more speed and less bureaucracy," is supposed to be, "Our value proposition is more speed and less bureaucracy."

👍 7 ↩ 2 ...

 **Daniel Brown** · 5h 33m ago **STAFF**
@Darren G. Thanks, Darren! That's been fixed.


👍 2 ↩

 **Darren G.** · 4h 59m ago
@Daniel Brown Now it says, "Our value proposition and [sic] more speed and less bureaucracy."


👍 4 ↩ ...

 **Phillip D.** · 3h 6m ago
Man oh Man! awesome story so glad that Mr. Johnson was able to live out his time in a dignified and proper manner.
Bravo to the niners.


👍 2 ↩ ...

 **Trey C.** · 4h 42m ago
Great stuff as always Dan! Such an easy cause to get behind. See you at the event tomorrow!

👍 1 ↩ ...


 **Brad S.** · 2h 52m ago
So freaking cool. Way to go.

👍 1 ↩ ...


 **Donnan S.** · 46m ago
Mr. Johnson is listed in the 1968 NFL Record Manual (under SF 49ers Rookie Roster) as "Leo Johnson." In the SF 49ers 1970 Media Guide, he is listed under his full name of "Leo Daniel Johnson."
The 49ers selected Leo Johnson in the 1968 NFL Draft as the first of two sixth-round picks (141st overall) out of Tennessee State (on a pick acquired from New Orleans for OT Dave McCormick).
While at Tennessee State, Leo Johnson was QB Eldridge Dickey's favorite receiver and caught a 100 passes in his last two seasons. The 49ers worked out Johnson at both WR and DB during the '68 Training Camp (their first training camp held on the UC-Santa Barbara campus).

If "the record books" list him as "Lee Johnson" then they need to do a re-edit.

👍 1 ↩ 1 ...

 **Daniel Brown** · 28m ago **STAFF**
@Donnan S. Yes! both pro-football.com and [NFL.com](https://nfl.com) have him as "Lee." So that media guide info is super helpful. Maybe we can get that key detail squared away at long last. Always great to hear from you, Donnan!

👍 ↩

 **Curtis R.** · 28m ago
I love this story, and good on everyone involved for taking care of a teammate. I also can't help but feel sick for the countless families who are left in terrible circumstances. I don't have answers, just sadness.

👍 ↩ ...

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