

Denver Johnson



PROFILE

- ▶ **Hometown:**
Seminole, Okla.
- ▶ **Position:**
Head Coach
- ▶ **Alma Mater:**
Tulsa '81

It is only fitting for a former offensive lineman turned head coach to enjoy knocking opposing defenses around, and that is still the case for Illinois State head coach Denver Johnson. As he enters his eighth season as the Redbird mentor, Johnson's run at Illinois State has produced some of the most prolific offensive campaigns in the program's history.

During his tenure, the Redbirds have established 28 new offensive school records, including the most points and the most rushing, passing and total yards in a season.

Players have also achieved individual accolades under Johnson with 52 all-conference selections, including the league's first ever three-time defensive player of the year Boomer Grigsby and the offensive and defensive players of the year in 2005 with Laurént Robinson and Brent Hawkins. Johnson and the Redbirds have also boasted the Gateway Defensive Player of the Year for the last five seasons with Grigsby winning the honor three times followed by Hawkins and Cameron Siskowic.

Johnson's players have gone on to receive 28 all-America honors in his tenure at Illinois State.

Entering the 2007 campaign, Johnson is coming off his most gratifying campaign as a head coach. In 2006, the Redbirds posted the second-highest win total in school history with nine victories, finished the season ranked No. 8 in the final polls and advanced to the quarterfinals of the NCAA Football Championship Subdivision Playoffs. There was also a record season at the box office, as ISU drew a pair of capacity crowds for the first time since 1970, while ranking No. 17 nationally in per game attendance.

For the third straight season, the Redbird passing offense was the best in the Gateway Conference. ISU averaged 227.8 yards per game, while the offense as a whole posted 397.5 yards per game and ranked No. 8 nationally.

In 2005, Johnson's Redbirds led the conference in total offense (477.5 ypg.) for the third time in his tenure. The 'Birds also led the league in scoring offense with a school record 39.2 points per game and passing offense with 268.7 yards per game.

ISU showcased its high-powered offense with a 61-35 victory at then-No. 1 Southern Illinois, followed by a 38-3 dismantling of national runner-up Northern Iowa. However, with a 7-4 overall record, the Redbirds were left out of the playoff picture despite being one of the nation's most explosive teams.

In 2004, Johnson's offense also ranked among the league's elite, as the Redbirds led the league in passing yards per game with 226.8.

The Redbirds finished the campaign bruised and battered as injuries decimated early season rotations and starting assignments forcing a 4-7 overall record, including four straight losses to end the campaign. Before the injury bug consumed the Redbird roster, ISU registered 480 yards of total offense at Minnesota and mounted fourth quarter comebacks against Eastern Illinois, Missouri State and Youngstown State.

In 2003, Johnson led the Redbirds to a 6-6 record, a season where the six losses came to a Big Ten Conference opponent and five NCAA I-AA Playoff participants. It was a typical Johnson team as the Redbirds set the tone on the ground, averaging 242.3 yards per game which anchored a conference-best 420 yards of total offense per contest.

The year prior Johnson guided the Redbirds to a 6-5 finish overall and a third-place effort in the Gateway Football Conference, with road wins at Northern Iowa and Indiana State and near misses at Western Illinois and Western Kentucky. The Redbirds capped the season with a road victory at Indiana State to rebound from a 2-9 record in 2001.

Illinois State originally plucked Johnson from Murray State after the 1999 season, where he was 7-4 in each of his three campaigns as the Racers' head coach.

The transition to a veteran ISU club in 2000 was not easy, at least in the beginning. The Redbirds were just 1-4 after five games and appeared destined for a losing record. But with Johnson at the helm, Illinois State righted the ship and became a late-season juggernaut that was arguably one of the best FCS teams at season's end, winning six straight for Johnson's fourth-straight 7-4 mark.

And the Redbirds did not rely too heavily on any particular unit, either. Instead, they became a pleasing blend of explosive offense and stingy defense. They averaged 32.8 points per game, while setting school records for total offensive yards in a game. Defensively, the team posted back-to-back shutouts, a feat that had not been accomplished at Illinois State in 40 years.

Several deserved credit for the turnaround, not the least of whom was the head coach.

After four years playing pro football, Johnson began his coaching career in 1985 as a graduate assistant at Oklahoma State and was with the Cowboys for the '85 Gator Bowl.

His first full-time coaching job came at Tennessee-Martin, where he was assistant head coach and coached the offensive line from 1986-89. In 1988, UT-Martin, with an explosive offense, fashioned a record of 11-2 with a quarter-final appearance in the Division II playoffs.

Johnson coached the offensive line at Oklahoma State from 1989-93 before embarking on a three-year stint as an assistant at Mississippi State. The 1993 Bulldogs earned a spot in the Peach Bowl, and in 1995 Johnson was recognized as one of the top assistant coaches in the Southeastern Conference.

Johnson was on the Oklahoma staff for the 1996 season before taking over the Murray State program prior to the 1997 campaign.

A late hiring process and the loss of several key players from the previous year's team appeared to have Johnson poised for a slow start at Murray State, but that was not the case. The Racers responded with a 7-4 mark.

Johnson graduated from Tulsa in 1981. He helped TU to the 1976 Independence Bowl as a player and

was a two-time All-Missouri Valley Conference offensive lineman under former Ohio State and Arizona State head coach John Cooper. He was also an academic all-conference pick.

Following his college playing career at Tulsa, Johnson moved to the professional ranks. He was with the National Football League's Tampa Bay Buccaneers from April 1981 to February 1983.

He then joined the Los Angeles Express of the now-defunct United States Football League from February 1983 through August 1984. Then wrapped up his playing career with the USFL's Houston Gamblers from February 1984 through August 1985.

His USFL playing days included playing stints with quarterbacks Jim Kelly and Steve Young, both of whom went on to stardom in the National Football League.

Known for his homespun humor and southern drawl, Johnson is a public speaker in high demand. His interesting delivery combined with a keen mind plays well in the corporate setting, at fund-raisers, in a recruit's home and in the Redbird locker room.

Johnson, a native of Seminole, Okla., has a varied list of interests. He collects vintage cars and guitars, has sky-dived and lists water skiing as a hobby.

Johnson's father, the late Luke Johnson, was a decorated veteran of World War II, and his mother, Claudia, still resides in Seminole, Okla., near the farm on the which the family lived.

Denver Johnson, 48, and his wife, Danita, have two daughters: Taylor, age 18, and Kelsey, age 16. The family, which is particularly active with the St. Jude Affiliates, resides in Bloomington.