
HUSKY FOOTBALL IN THE DON JAMES ERA

DEREK JOHNSON

INTRODUCTION BY DON JAMES
FOREWORDS BY LINCOLN KENNEDY
AND DAVE HOFFMANN

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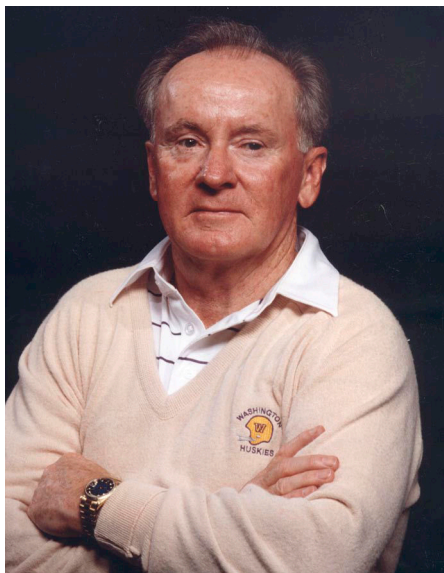
Introduction by Don James

SINCE MY RETIREMENT IN 1993, I have had the pleasure of getting to know Derek. He and his family have had and still have a great interest and love for Husky athletics, especially the sport of football. His Dad, Ron Johnson, is a tremendous supporter of Husky football, having only missed one home football game since 1957.

Derek began attending Husky games at the age of five, when I was starting my second year as head coach at the University of Washington. He witnessed many memorable games from my eighteen-year career with the Huskies. My first two and a half years at Washington were very difficult, but our 1978 Rose Bowl championship put us on the map. Overall, we went to six Rose Bowls, one Orange Bowl, and experienced many other wonderful moments and victories. My retirement was also a difficult time for everyone involved. *Husky Football in the Don James Era* captures many of those moments, with commentaries from several of my former players.

During the past few years, I have done a number of interviews with Derek and have enjoyed reading his many articles. From the very beginning I have been impressed with his method of research, his questions and more importantly his writing skills.

You will enjoy what Derek and the Husky players have to say about their experiences and the inner workings of the Husky football program.



One of the chapters features a game against eleventh-ranked BYU in 1986. I remember standing on the sidelines at Husky Stadium and watching BYU's Robert Parker return the opening kickoff for a touchdown. After that, we really got after them. We scored 52 straight points to put the game out of reach. Our defense was outstanding. We had 10 quarterback sacks and held BYU to -45 yards rushing. I also remember being discouraged when we gave up two touchdowns late in the fourth quarter. However, we still won 52-21.

That BYU game sums up my career at Washington. I told the media afterwards that "I didn't like the start and I didn't like the finish, but in between it was pretty good."

Don James

Head Football Coach, University of Washington 1975-1992

Member, College Football Hall of Fame

"The past is not dead. In fact, it's not even past."

—William Faulkner

Don James comes to Washington

DON AND CAROL JAMES, walking side-by-side, were being led by athletic department officials down the shadowy corridor of the Husky Stadium tunnel, toward the vivid patch of daylight up ahead. The stadium was empty and quiet. It was an overcast day in December 1974, and Don James had just been hired as the new football coach for the University of Washington. Being from Kent State University in Ohio, James possessed little familiarity with the details of Washington's storied football history. But that tunnel had been the thoroughfare to thousands of Husky players for decades. Players like Consensus All-American tailback George Wilson in the 1920s; tailback Hugh McElhenny and quarterback Don Heinrich of the early 1950s; the legendarily tough Don McKeta and linebacker Rick Redman in the 1960s; and of course, Sonny Sixkiller, the electrifying Cherokee quarterback who achieved folk hero status in the early 70s.

As Don and Carol James emerged from the mouth of the tunnel, they found themselves near the corner of the west end zone. They looked across at the vast steep tier of the south side upper deck. They saw the weather-beaten seats which nearly encircled the field and comprised the stadium's lower bowl. They spied the old scoreboard at a distance, and beautiful Lake Washington just beyond that. And they wandered out upon the dark green Astroturf. Don's "new office" looked great. The only part that seemed surreal was when they

stepped out in front of the stadium, adjacent to the rushing traffic of Montlake Boulevard. It was there, as they gazed up at the reader board in disbelief, that they saw the pronouncement in giant letters: "WELCOME COACH JONES."

In Washington's previous two seasons of 1973 and 1974, the Huskies had struggled mightily-- compiling records of 2-9 and 5-6. The previous coach was Jim Owens, and he had stepped down after eighteen years that witnessed both glory and tumult. Now, as word of James's hiring spread through Western Washington, many Husky fans and sportswriters expressed disappointment. People had hoped for a big-time name like Dan Devine from the Green Bay Packers or Mike White from the California Golden Bears. The reality was that Don James was the UW's fourth choice. *The Seattle P-I's* Phil Taylor tried to provide solace to his readers: "While James may be something less than a household word around Seattle and the Pacific Eight, he is regarded with considerable respect back in the tough Mid-American Conference."

The next day, Washington Athletic Director Joe Kearney introduced Don James to the assembled Seattle-area media. James didn't intimidate anyone with his size, standing at just 5'8". He was methodical in manner and seemingly slow to smile-- and just four days shy of his forty-second birthday. At that first press conference, one beat writer noted that James comported himself with "stern sincerity." James went on to describe himself as being "more of an organized guy than emotional guy." When asked of his thoughts on the Washington job, he said: "There are eight or ten teams with an opportunity to be a national champion. Obviously, there are eighteen teams with an opportunity to get into the Rose Bowl. In the Big Ten there are probably two or three with a real chance, maybe the same way in the Pac-8. I think we're one of them. I think we have a great university and a great facility and we've been there before. People in my profession

think that this is a school where you can accomplish anything you want in coaching, that you can become a national champion.”

James indicated that a whole new system was going into place, and concluded the press conference by saying: “With the schedule we’ve got, we’re going to have to be dog-gone good. The season starts in nine months, against a very good Arizona State team. We’ve got to get good in a hurry.” Upon meeting the players, he set about improving the culture at Washington. He implemented a strenuous off-season conditioning program. Some players resented the change. Other players, like linebacker Dan Lloyd, expressed enthusiasm, after witnessing measurable improvements in their own speed, strength and agility.

When it came to recruiting, James told his newly-assembled staff of assistant coaches that they needed to “Build a fence around the state of Washington.” James showed his staff film of USC playing and pointed to the screen. “These are the type of players we need to locate and recruit if we’re ever going to win a conference championship.” He employed a unique system for evaluating recruits. It involved numbers ranging from 1.1 – 4.10. The first number reflected the anticipated year that the recruit would become a starter, and the second would be the game number. Thus, a recruit with a 2.3 rating, was anticipated to become a starter by the third game of his second season. The tracking of players was conducted manually upon note cards. James insisted his incoming recruits possess five key components: (1) They must give 100%; (2) Have courage on and off the field; (3) Have the ability to master their position, and not hurt the team with mistakes; (4) Care about their teammates; and (5) Have great loyalty, which is invariably tested with adversity.

As winter turned to spring in early 1975, practices began at Husky Stadium. It was an adjustment for the players, as they were used to the more hands-on ways of Jim Owens. For one, a tower had now

been placed along the south sideline at midfield. Every day, as practice began, Don James would ascend that tower. There he would stand taking notes, mostly in silence, save for an occasional comment spoken into a bullhorn toward an assistant coach. Otherwise, he remained above the fray, surveying the scene, in a perpetual pose of solitary sufficiency. Scattered below were his assistant coaches, yelling orders and encouraging players through the strenuous drills. Every Husky, at some point during his time at Washington, cast an anxious glance up toward the tower, wondering how they rated. "Every single minute of every single practice was accounted for," recalled former Assistant Coach Skip Hall years later to writer Steve Rudman. "The one thing Don would do before each practice was listen to each assistant. He'd go right down the line and fill in a chart showing who would be doing what during each segment. Every minute was utilized to the fullest. I think Don's organizational ability was one of his real strengths. I remember that every minute seemed carefully laid out with each coach deciding what the need for the day was. And then everything was written up. And he was very efficient with time. We had meticulous organization and planning. We critiqued everything, and we used those critiques to get better. The thoroughness was incredible at times. Some of the coaches who had been on Jim Owens' staff would get into some of Don's meetings and they'd come out with their heads spinning. Everything was played out ahead of time. The other thing is that Don hired good people. He had a good plan and he managed people well. He had the ability to motivate and get the most out of his people."

By early September 1975, Don James's debut at Arizona State was less than a week away. He was irked with some of his players. "I am not satisfied," stated James to the media. "The offense looked like it was going through popcorn drills. We weren't aggressive. We were sluggish." A reporter cited to him a handful of players that were publicly upset from being named to the scout team, when previously

they had been starters under Jim Owens. James acknowledged this. "Yes, those guys on the scout teams are down," he said. "And we understand their plight, their position. But a mature competitor goes all out every day."

It wasn't until Friday night that James named a junior college transfer named Harold (Warren) Moon as his starting quarterback. Raised eyebrows and even muted anger emanated from some Husky fans as the news broke. It had been largely assumed that the previous year's starter, Chris Rowland, would continue to lead the way. Moon would be making a start despite not yet having attended a class at Washington.

On the humid evening of September 13, 1975, in Tempe, Arizona, Don James led his first Husky team running onto the grass at Sun Devil Stadium. Throughout the game, rain squalls and swirling winds would inundate the field. Flashes of lightning were sighted in the distance, out in the barren desert. On Washington's first play from scrimmage, Moon fumbled the snap and Arizona State recovered. This quickly led to a Sun Devil touchdown, which set the game's tone. By late in the fourth quarter, the Sun Devils led 28-12 and possessed the ball inside the Husky five-yard line. Arizona State Head Coach Frank Kush called time out with just three seconds left, in order to get in a final play. Along the opposing sideline, Don James outwardly remained stoic. But in reality, he churned with indignation. Moments later, the Sun Devils lined up and executed an end run to perfection, to tally their fifth touchdown and finish off the Huskies 35-12. The UW players trudged toward the locker room, enduring the screaming taunts from ASU fans. Washington's unknown new coach now had an 0-1 record. Don James would have to wait three years before attempting revenge on Arizona State and its coach, Frank Kush.