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[Johnson refused to give up](#)- [Gwen Knapp](#)

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Eric Johnson knew where he stood at the end of last year. He was in a thick fog, hidden from his coaches. When they sat down to assess the future of the 49ers, his name would barely come up.

For the second time in three years, he had spent the season on injured reserve. Most of the coaches were new, and they didn't know him much better than Jets linebacker Mo Lewis did in 2001, Johnson's rookie year. When Johnson tried to block him, what did Lewis see? A wispy excuse for a tight end, a guy who was playing wide receiver in college the year before ... no, no, worse than that, a guy who was playing wide receiver at Yale.

"What are you doing here?" Lewis said, according to an account Johnson offered to Chronicle beat writer Kevin Lynch when asked for classic trash-talking examples. "You should be on Wall Street, not in the NFL."

Over the next few years, Johnson gained credibility, then respect, then admiration. Then the injuries came and took away his security. On the last day the 49ers convened as a team in 2005, he went to his coaches, one by one, and made his case. He said he would devote every second possible to offseason training and to learning the new system.

"He said, 'I want to be here and I want to be a part of what's going on,' " Nolan said.

The coaches were impressed with his earnestness. But on draft day, they were more impressed with Vernon Davis' power and speed. They had a new tight end, a No. 1 draft pick.

So where did that leave the Yalie? At first, he remained in the thick fog. Then the team started practicing. The coaches require every receiver to run 30 yards with the ball after a catch, and Nolan noticed that Johnson always did more than expected.

"Whether he gets the ball or not, if you watch him, he'll always try to finish the play with the player that has the ball," Nolan said.

Again, the coaches were impressed, not to mention grateful. A year earlier, they had had no legitimate candidates to start at tight end, a predicament that affected Alex Smith's development as a quarterback. His college offense didn't employ a tight end, and to learn the 49ers' scheme, he needed a polished athlete at the position.

Johnson came back in better form than before, according to Nolan and tight ends coach Pete Hoener. Always a strong receiver, he had cultivated better blocking skills. He had delivered on the promises he made in their offices last winter.

When Davis broke his leg in the third game of the season, Johnson gave the team a perfect insurance policy. Tight end had become the deepest, most upgraded spot on the depth chart. Going into today's game against the Bears, Johnson has 17 receptions, which ranks him fourth on the team and only three catches behind the Giants' heavily hyped tight end, Jeremy Shockey.

In fact, Johnson's 82 catches in 2004 top Shockey's career best for a single season, 74 in 2002. Of course, Shockey plays with great wide receivers, whereas in 2004, Johnson had minimal competition for the ball. Still, 82 receptions for a tight end are exceptional, which may be why Johnson's young quarterback can cite the stat from memory. (That may say something about Smith, as well.)

Johnson wouldn't bring up that stat on his own. He may rival Shockey as a receiver, but not as a loudmouth. Brashness, for Johnson, means wearing retro Converse Chuck Taylors while training in the weight room. He has said he prefers them because their loose construction requires more stabilizing effort from his muscles.

Johnson seems most comfortable talking about himself when there's some mockery involved. Late last week, he grinned throughout a story about the first time he got into a three-point stance to block. He faced John Miley, a defensive end, in practice.

"I did not even touch him," Johnson said. "I didn't even touch his jersey. He swam around me. Right away, I realized that it wasn't going to be easy."

But, as his coaches and the Chuck Taylors attest, he isn't looking for the easy way. Hoener thinks that Johnson's personality

made him especially well-suited to coping with the team's decision to draft Davis. "Of course, it was hard," Hoener said, "but I think it brought out even more of his intensity and his competitiveness."

In practice, the coach said, Johnson mentors Davis and fellow rookie Delanie Walker. He told himself, just as he told a reporter last week, that the 49ers didn't write him off so much as they followed a cardinal rule of drafting. "They took the best athlete available," Johnson said, "and I had to understand that."

But he's healthy now, a critical part of the 49ers' immediate future, and a strong link to their past. He and Bryant Young are the only remaining starters from the 49ers' last winning team, in 2002. And Johnson's work habits owe a debt to the team's better days. He heard that Jerry Rice ran every practice catch into the end zone, and he borrowed the idea.

Unlike most Ivy Leaguers, Johnson doesn't know what his next career move will be. He thinks he'd like to run his own business, but right now football is all he can think about. If anyone cares to repeat Mo Lewis' question -- why are you here? -- that's the answer.

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