

Edwardsville Star Running Back Justin Johnson, Jr., Signs With West Virginia, Is Looking Forward To Opportunity To Compete In Big XII Conference

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE - Justin Johnson, Jr. has always been a very hard worker, and in his freshman year, stepped into the lineup for the Edwardsville High football team after an injury to the team's starting running back at the time, and made the most of his

opportunity, last year rushing for 1,122 yards and nine touchdowns, adding on 13 pass receptions for 140 yards and three more touchdowns in helping the Tigers to an 8-3 season, advancing to the second round of the Illinois High School Association Class 8A playoffs.

On Wednesday, the first day of the early signing period, Johnson saw his hard work pay off when he signed a letter of intent to attend West Virginia University in Morgantown, W.Va., in a ceremony at the high school.

Johnson had announced his commitment to the Mountaineers in September, and made it official on Wednesday, and he's very excited for the chance to play for head coach Neal Brown and West Virginia in the Big XII conference in the fall of 2021.

"I'm very honored and very blessed to have achieved this goal," Johnson said in a post-ceremony interview.

The Mountaineers' program, which has been historically one of the best in the nation, was very appealing to Johnson.

"Just a great program in total," Johnson said, "a great atmosphere, and the coaches are also amazing."

Johnson is looking ahead to having the chance to compete in the Big XII, against prominent schools such as Oklahoma, Oklahoma State, Texas, Baylor, Texas Tech, Iowa State and Kansas State, among the other member schools.

"Oh, yeah, I'm very excited, and I'm looking forward to it," Johnson said.

The game-day experience at West Virginia's home stadium, Mountaineer Field, along with one of the nation's loudest and loyal fan bases, also attracted Johnson to Morgantown.

"Like I said, the coaches are amazing, they made me feel at home," Johnson said. "The atmosphere's just great, the fans are amazing. The love from there is unreal, and I just felt it was a perfect fit for me."

Tigers head coach Matt Martin is very happy for and proud of Johnson on his selection of West Virginia.

"Yeah, what a great opportunity for Justin," Martin said. "It's a high level of football, it's a great institution, a great reputation, so for him to have that opportunity, he's worked hard, he's earned it, but it's a blessing, no doubt."

Being able to compete in one of the Power Five conferences such as the Big XII is a great opportunity for Johnson as well.

"Absolutely," Martin said. "It's a high level of football, so anytime you get that chance, you're going to be able to test yourself."

The Mountaineers will be getting a very complete player in Johnson.

"To me, what I've said, and what I continue to say is I think he's a very good balanced back," Martin said. "He'll be able to run, he'll be able to catch, he'll block. He's a multiple tool player, and he's a great kid. He'll be a good leader as well."

Johnson also feels he'll bring a lot to the table for the team.

"I think I bring a lot to the table," Johnson said. "Just with the way I play football, my running style, the way I carry the football, and my leadership skills, also. I think I'm going to click with the guys up there very well, and I think they're going to show me a few things, also. It's going to be a good fit for the team, nothing to hold."

Johnson plans on majoring in mechanical engineering at West Virginia, and also considered many other Football Bowl Subdivision schools such as Washington State, Louisville and California, among others.

"But at the end of the day, it came out that West Virginia was right for me," Johnson said.

Johnson's also a very good student, and does well in the classroom. He has some big plans for his future.

"Education's not an issue," Martin said. "He'll be fine on that end."

Martin also talked about how Johnson began to make an impact with the Tigers as a freshman.

"Our running back at the time got hurt," Martin said, "and so, we watched Justin play some underclass games, and though he was head and heels above the kids his age, and wanted to give him a chance at the varsity level. As I said, the opportunity was there, and he made the most of it, and here we are. He's played three years there, and hopefully, we get a fourth."

Both Johnson and Martin are hopeful that the Tigers will get to play their delayed 2020 season, with football having been moved to the spring by the IHSA due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Johnson is looking forward to the upcoming spring season.

"Yeah, I'm looking forward to it," Johnson said. "It's always great to compete, and get my senior year in, so it's always good."

Martin is also optimistic about Johnson and the rest of the Tigers being able to compete this spring.

"I think we still have a chance, 50-50," Martin said. "The fact that the vaccine's out now, it seems to be doing well, people seem to have positive reactions to it, and to me, as long as it continues to as many people as possible in a short amount of time here, I think we have a good chance, I do."

If the Tigers do get to play, Martin is looking forward to a big season for Johnson.

"Sure," Martin said. "I think there's something special about high school football, and he's one of the lucky ones where he has an opportunity to go on it and continue to play. Even if you have that chance, or don't have that chance, there's nothing like your senior year of football. So I think every kid should have that opportunity."

As far as a favorite memory of playing for Edwardsville, Johnson has so many, it was hard to choose for him.

"I'd have to see. My favorite memory of playing for the Edwardsville Tigers – uh, let's see. This is tough, I have a lot of memories," Johnson said with a laugh and smile. "But I would say it would have to be when I first got put on the varsity level, and I played my first varsity game. I was kind of nervous, but I was very excited also. I knew I made it to the next level"

Starting in the fall of 2021, Johnson will begin to play at the NCAA Division-I level, and it's like a dream come true for him.

"Oh yeah, it's crazy," Johnson said with a smile. "I'm very thankful, very appreciative of the opportunity."

As far as this spring goes, Johnson is looking ahead to a great season in his final year with the Tigers.

"I'm just looking forward to bettering myself, my skills," Johnson said. "perfecting my craft and getting ready for college."