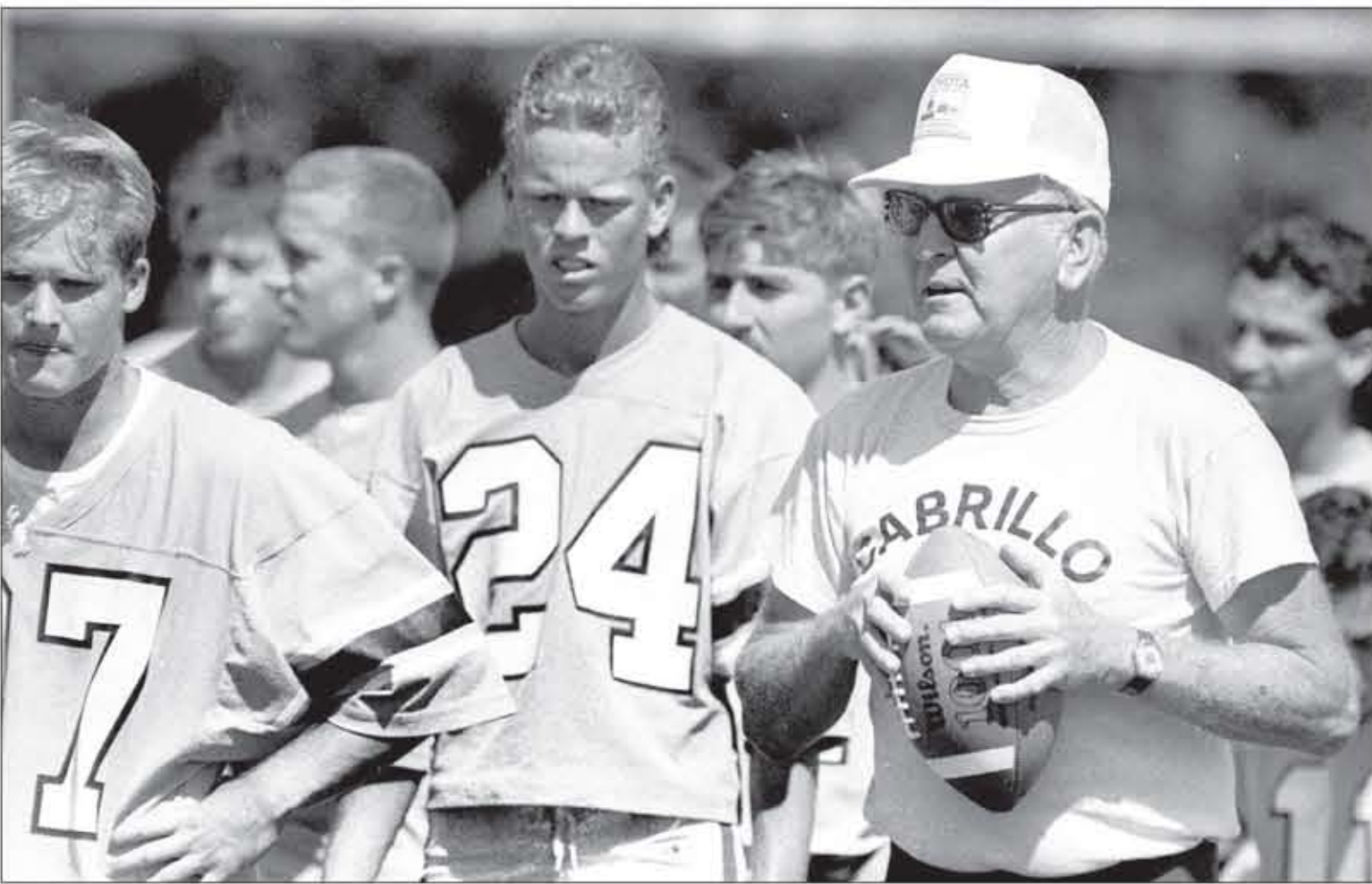


CABRILLO ATHLETICS

LIFE COACH



Cabrillo College assistant football coach Gene Johnson works with players at practice in 1990. Johnson is retiring after 43 years coaching at Cabrillo, including the last eight as the Seahawks softball coach. He was the head coach of the Watsonville High football team from 1956-1967.

Gene Johnson's started coaching in the county in the county at Watsonville High in 1955. He's retiring this year at the age of 85.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Gene Johnson, 85, retires after nearly six decades coaching in Santa Cruz County

By RYAN MOSES
rmoses@santacruzsentinel.com

Gene Johnson is trying to figure out how to spend his newfound free time, but he's a little out of practice. He's been pretty busy coaching the last six decades.

Now, after nine seasons coaching the Cabrillo softball team, 43 as an assistant for the Seahawks' football team and 13 as the Watsonville High varsity head football coach, Johnson is calling it a career at the age of 85.

His wife Doris finally persuaded him it was time to retire.

"We had our 63rd wedding anniversary and my wife said, 'If you want to have the 64th you better give it up and come home once in a while,'" Johnson said.

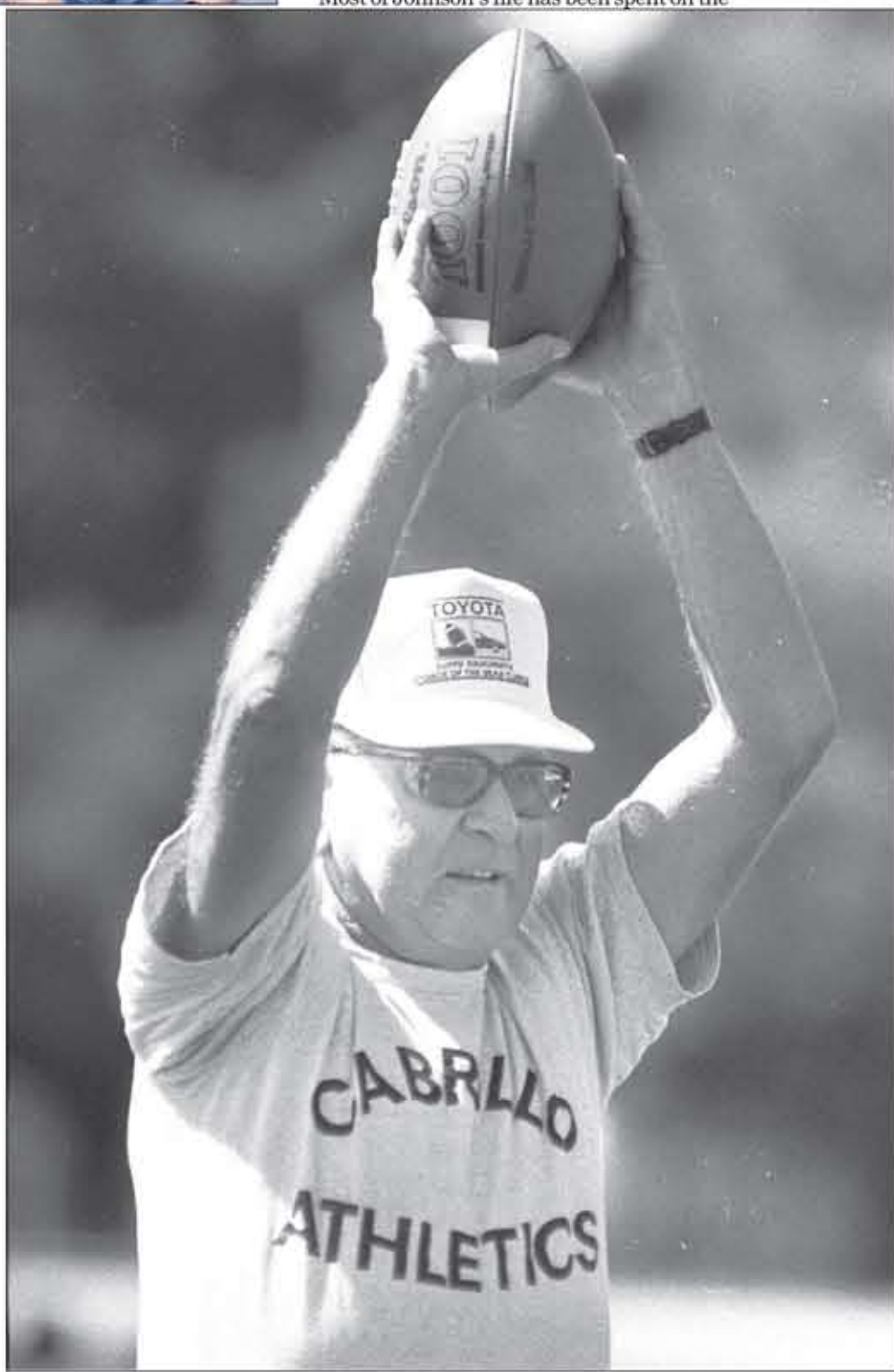
Most of Johnson's life has been spent on the

sideline or practice field. His career started as a baseball and football coach at Washington High in Fremont in 1951. It probably would have started sooner, but he joined the Navy when he was 17 and fought it World War II until he was 20, first in the Atlantic chasing U-boats, then on the Pacific front.

"I was stationed in Guam when they dropped the bomb, getting ready for the invasion of Japan," Johnson said. "The bomb cost a lot of people their lives, but I think it saved mine."

When he left the service, Johnson attended San Jose State where he studied physical education. After graduating, he got his first job coaching baseball and football in Fremont at Washington High, and first came to Watsonville in 1955 with the baseball team to play a

SEE JOHNSON ON C5



Gene Johnson at Cabrillo College football practice in 1990.

BILL LOVEJOY/SENTINEL FILE

JOHNSON

Continued from C1

doubleheader.

That night, he told Doris that Watsonville seemed like a nice place to raise a family. It just so happened Watsonville High was looking for a PE teacher, and Johnson took over as the school's junior varsity football coach that fall.

Johnson had also been coaching the football team at Washington, and was replaced by Bill Walsh when he moved to Watsonville. Johnson said that was one of two times he was succeeded by the legendary 49ers coach, who also took over the semipro San Jose Packers when Johnson left.

"Some where along the line he passed me up. I'm not sure when," Johnson said. "He was a good friend."

At Watsonville, Johnson replaced legendary coach Emmett Geiser — for whom the school's football stadium is named — as varsity football coach in 1956. He led the program for 13 seasons, and won the Monterey Bay League title in 1960.

Johnson's coaching career stalled very briefly in April of 1968 when he was released as head coach at Watsonville following two losing seasons. He remained at the school as the head of the PE department, but his work as a football coach was over. That was until a couple hours later when Cabrillo head coach Hal Mitchell knocked on Johnson's door and asked him to join his staff. That was the start of Johnson's four-decade long career with the Seahawks.

"Gene was a very hard worker, very dedicated to the game," said Joe Marvin, who was an assistant coach with Johnson at Cabrillo before taking over as head coach in 1972. "He did an awful lot of scouting. Gene was a guy who would get in the car and drive 200 miles to scout another junior college football team. A lot of the coaches didn't want to do it."

Johnson's career at Cabrillo spanned five head coaches — Mitchell, Marvin, Don Montgomery, Steve Cox and current coach Bill Garrison. He spent most years working with defensive backs and helped a few reach the NFL, including Watsonville's Sherman Cocroft, Santa Cruz's Reggie Stephens, and most recently Soquel graduate Dwight Lowery, who plays for the New York Jets.

"It's a very satisfying job to take these young athletes and work with them, see them progress," Johnson said. "The best thing I ever did was talk Sherman Cocroft into changing from wide receiver to defensive back. Boy, he fit right into it immediately and led nation in interceptions. There were about 15 wide receivers on the team and four defensive backs. I had seen him in high school and I told him, 'You're going to play a lot more football if you get on this side of the ball.' Next practice he was with me."

"Steve Cox accused me of doing the same thing with Lowery. He was going to be Cox's quarterback at spring practice."

Johnson was recognized for his dedication to Cabrillo last year when he was inducted into the California Commu-

nity College Sports Hall of Fame.

His commitment to the Seahawks goes beyond the football field. When the school's softball coach resigned suddenly in 2003, Johnson was asked to take over the program for a year since he had experience playing fast pitch. Of course with Johnson there's no such thing as a short coaching stint, and that one year turned into eight seasons before Doris finally got her way.

"A whole lot of people at 80-something, they can't do anything," Cabrillo athletic director Dale Murray said. "It seems like he can only do something."

Johnson has been surrounded by sports since the day he was born. He goes by Gene after his middle name, Eugene, but his first name is actually Harold. His father had seen Red Grange, who's real first name is also Harold, play two weeks before Johnson was born, and convinced his wife to name their first son after the legendary halfback.

Johnson's younger brother, Marvin, played on the Los Angeles Rams' world championship team in 1951 in his rookie year and later for the Green Bay Packers. His other brother, Jim, played quarterback at San Jose State and was in the Cleveland Indians' minor league system for about six years.

Even in retirement, Johnson is finding a way to keep sports in his life. He's trying to stay busy helping start a Hall of Fame at Cabrillo.

"It's going to be a while to adjust to this. I can't sit and watch," Johnson said. "I have to be doing something."