

**Johnson**

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minority owner in the NBA."

Johnson, 56, is the great-grandson of a freed slave and was the only one of 10 siblings to graduate from college. A Mississippi native, he grew up in Freeport, Ill., went to college at the University of Illinois and earned a master's degree at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.

Johnson, who now lives in Washington, D.C., worked for four years as a lobbyist for the National Cable & Telecommunications Association, a trade association representing cable companies, then started BET with \$15,000 of his own money and \$500,000 from cable mogul John Malone.

The network proved a financial hit. But it also drew criticism from within the black community that it catered to lowbrow tastes and failed to project positive images for black Americans with heavy programming of music videos and ghetto humor.

"I think Bob understands

the criticism," Lee said. "He's always been very committed to news and public affairs, but he's been very committed that it's a business first. He's always had the approach that we do the best programming we can within the budget that we have, and we continue to push advertising revenue."

During the years BET was publicly traded, Wall Street seemed frustrated by Johnson's efforts to extend the BET brand into areas that ranged far from the core network. There were spinoff channels, movie production deals, plans for casinos and nightclubs and financial services companies.

"After we went public with BET and we had money and opportunities to do other things, his first question was what other areas can we get into," Lee said. "Once you have a brand, you can put that on restaurants, on merchandise. At one point we had 13 different subsidiaries."

In fact, Johnson's initial interest in owning an NBA team — he tried to buy the then-Washington Bullets in 1994 — was in part to provide programming for BET.

That kind of focus on synergy and brand expansion may be a primary reason why Johnson won the team over the group headed by Larry Bird and Boston businessman Steve Belkin.

For a media-savvy entity like the NBA, which has pushed the blurring of the lines between sports and entertainment, Johnson is a perfect fit.

At a news conference, Johnson described the NBA as "a dominant, influential kind of brand" and said, "For me to be associated with that is an extension of what I do well."

Dean Bonham, a Denver-based sports marketing consultant, said Johnson and the NBA are a great fit for each other.

"This is somebody who has done his homework, who understands the connection of entertainment and sports, who understands the importance of a brand," Bonham said.

In addition to son Brett, Johnson has an 18-year-old daughter, Paige, who is an accomplished equestrian. Johnson and his wife, Sheila, were recently divorced.



Robert Johnson poses at the 20th anniversary ceremony for BET with Stevie Wonder and network executive Debra Lee.

**Pitts**

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er," Pitts said. "I had to be myself. I'm not a vocal type of leader. It wouldn't be me to be serious all the time. But when game time comes, I'm always ready."

Most times during the season the attention was focused on the massive Carver offensive line, which featured four 300-pounders, Isaiah Thomas (6-4, 320), Matt Brim (6-6, 310), Cody Mathews (6-0, 320) and Chris Williams (6-2, 310). And if the spotlight wasn't on that unit, it was on the outstanding stable of running backs (Monté Anthony, Jayvon Biddle, Eric Eaton, Charles Russell, Jason Jowers) that helped the Yellowjackets rack up more than 300 rushing yards.

However, Pitts came through with several key games, passing the football that pushed the Yel-

lowjackets to victories over Parkland, Greensboro Smith and Greensboro Dudley during the regular season. He picked up his effort in the playoffs, throwing the game-winning touchdown in the final two minutes of play to boost the Yellow-



Wilkes

jackets to a third-round win over Lawndale Burns.

"It seemed like his performance got better as the season went along," Wilkes said. "When we really needed a big play, he was always there throughout the season."

Pitts finished the season with more than 1,400 passing yards

and 15 touchdowns. He also ran for seven touchdowns even though he shared the starting job with D'Angelo Gray for much of the regular season.

"Those two guys were pretty even during the regular season," Wilkes said.

"But Pitts stepped it up during the conference games, and that put him in position to get most of the snaps during the playoffs."

Even though his statistics didn't match those of Weaks during his senior season, Pitts was the steady influence the team needed to earn its second state title in five seasons.

"It wasn't an individual thing for me," Pitts said. "I just wanted to do all I could to help the team win. I accomplished a major goal that I set for myself and the team, and that's the important thing."

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Matt Brim

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