Can Chris Johnson Return to the CJ2K of Old?

Working Towards $2 Million: Why Chris Johnson’s Contract Incentives Aren’t Out of Reach

Week 2 Player To Watch: Chris Johnson

On August 17, 2015, a few weeks into training camp, the Arizona Cardinals signed the running back formerly known as CJ2K to a 1 year deal. The deal was for $870,000 with no signing bonus, but Johnson could earn up to $2 *if* he runs for 1,300 yards and makes the pro bowl.

Ha. It really seemed like a joke when I first heard the incentives built into the contract, I mean there’s no way CJ2K is going to suddenly turn into the CJ2K of old simply by being signed as a backup running back for the Carson Palmer led Arizona Cardinals. For one, he’s a backup. Andre Ellington has the starting job locked down; head coach Bruce Arians has been insistent on this fact since May. Secondly, there’s another Johnson that is running behind Andre in 2015: skilled rookie David Johnson. It was no guarantee at the time of this signing that Chris would be second string, especially after David had an impressive debut in week 2 of the preseason.

Arizona Cardinals starting running back Andre Ellington went down last week on a non-contact injury in the 4th quarter. After getting an MRI, it turns out Andre has a sprained PCL and is only expected to be out 1-3 games. Injuries are unfortunate, but an injury for one is an opportunity for another. Ellington’s injury has opened the door for Chris Johnson to resurrect his career and return to his CJ2K form of 2009.

When people think of CJ2K now, they think of a guy who had one amazing year (only 7 players have rushed for over 2,000 yards in a season), but who is now way past his prime and kind of washed up. I mean last year with the jets he couldn’t even rush for 700 yards in a run heavy offense. He wasn’t signed this year until well into training camp, making him an afterthought for most teams, including teams riding the strength of Isaiah Crowell (Browns), some guy named Tevin Coleman (Falcons), and the new Chris Johnson in Tennessee, Bishop Sankey at running back. Is he really as bad as we all think? Let’s take a closer look into his career stats.

Since CJ2K came into the league in 2008, he has rushed for at least 1,000 yards in six of his seven seasons, with last year with the Jets being his career low. Each of his six years with the Titans, CJ rushed for over 1,000 yards and had over 1,400 total yards from scrimmage. After the Titans decided to part ways with him, Chris found himself going to New York to play for head coach Rex Ryan where he was part of a RBBC (Running Back By Committee), a stylistic choice by Rex, with bruiser Chris Ivory and 3rd down back Bilal Powell. As down a year as it was for Chris Johnson, this almost entirely had to do with the RBBC in New York, evidenced by his 4.3 yards per carry for the season. The problem wasn’t his diminishing skill, or his older age or whatever. The problem was Rex Ryan deciding to implement an RBBC. I honestly don’t blame him; I mean it has been common in the NFL to have a thunder-lightning approach at running back, other recent examples being Bradshaw-Jacobs for the Giants five years ago and Bush-Bell for the Lions last year. It’s just unfortunate for Chris Johnson that he ended up with the Jets. Recency Bias is causing everyone to believe that CJ is done, he’s washed up, he’s right around 30 years old, and he won’t last much longer. Guys, he’s only one year removed from his stint with the Titans where he consistently put up numbers rushing and receiving out of the backfield.

Chris Johnson does have a few things working against him however. The main thing is his age (he turns 30 on September 23rd), but also the Cardinals offense may limit him. Since 1990, there have been 27 instances of running backs rushing for over 1,000 yards at age 30+. That averages out to right about one old guy per year that does it. Frank Gore, at his seasoned age of 32, is still running hard for the Colts, and Colts head coach Chuck Pagano has already promised a 1,000 yard rusher from the team this year. So there’s one. There’s also this guy named Adrian Peterson on the Vikings, who historically has been pretty solid. So maybe two. But maaaayybee we’ll get three this year.

 Is this Cardinals offense capable of producing a 1,000 yard rusher? They have been ridiculed for having a below average offensive line when it comes to running the football, Andre Ellington can tell you all about that. He averaged an abysmal 3.3 yards per carry last year, who some would attribute to the offensive line, but I would attribute it more to the many injuries he battled and played through last year. Football Outsiders ranks offensive lines’ run blocking ability, weighting differently runs that result in losses, short yard gains, medium yard gains, and big gains. In 2009, the Titans ranked 22nd in the league in Football Outsiders’ “Adjusted Line Yards” statistic. That’s the bottom half of the league. And CJ still found a way to become the 6th player to run for over 2,000 yards in a season, and set the record for most yards from scrimmage with over 2,500 yards. Football Outsiders found the Cardinals ranked 24th in Adjusted Line Yards this past year. The thing about the Cardinals offense is they run it through Carson Palmer. We all saw last year what happens if he’s not playing. They like to throw the ball; they run a lot of 3 WR sets with Michael Floyd, Larry Fitzgerald, and John Brown. This means fewer men in the box to stop Cardinals running backs, which should mean more open lanes for CJ.

Now, I’m not saying that Chris Johnson is the same runner he was back in ’09. Obviously he has his age working against him, but it’s really all about opportunity. Had Chris had the opportunity to be the featured back for the Jets last year, he could have easily eclipsed 1,000 yards rushing, and he likely could have done it on less than 250 carries. He’s looked fine in limited action this year, he can still cut, and I’m sure he’s still fast. Maybe not record setting 4.24-40 time fast, but I’m sure he can run a 4.4. He’s healthy, he is still only 29 (if only for a few more days), and Arians has given him the starting job for this week against the Bears. As much as I love my team, we don’t know how to stop running backs anymore. I am optimistic Fangio can do something with our untalented defense, but holding teams to less than 100 rushing yards is going to be a tall task for us all year. I hate to say it, but if there’s any team that can make Chris Johnson look good again, it’s the Bears.

Finally, I’m going to leave you all with a list of things that need to happen for Chris Johnson to get that $2 million incentive built into his contract.

**Things that need to happen for Chris Johnson to get his 1,300 rushing yards and have another pro bowl year in 2015:**

Andre Ellington stays injured/gets reinjured (this would bother me, he’s on my fantasy team. That being said it’s very likely, he’s super fragile)

David Johnson doesn’t do anything special in relief of CJ this Sunday (though he did have a 55 yard touchdown on one touch last week…)

Chris Johnson finds the fountain of youth on Sunday (4+ ypc, should be easily achievable, unless he’s bad)

Carson Palmer stays healthy (Cardinals can’t function without him)