

Jurors acquit ex-Tennessee football players in rape trial

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KNOXVILLE, Tenn. (AP) – Two former University of Tennessee football players were acquitted Friday of the aggravated rape charges they had been indicted on nearly 3 ½ years ago.

A jury of seven women and five men deliberated for almost 1 ½ hours Friday afternoon before finding A.J. Johnson and Michael Williams not guilty on all counts. “We prayed, trusted in God,” Johnson said afterward. “I just knew God was going to take care of it.”

Johnson, 26, embraced friends and relatives as soon as the jury departed. The 25-year-old Williams gave a big hug to his lawyer, David Eldridge. The woman who said both men raped her left the courtroom as the not-guilty verdicts for Johnson were announced and before the jury foreman had even read the decision on Williams.



A.J. Johnson reaches to hug a family member after a jury acquitted both Johnson and

Michael Williams on aggravated rape charges Friday, July 27, 2018, in Knoxville, Tenn. Johnson and Williams were indicted on February 2015 after a woman said both men raped her during a party at Johnson's apartment in the early morning hours of Nov. 16, 2014. Johnson and Williams were suspended from the Tennessee football team less than 48 hours after the party and never played for Tennessee again. (Michael Patrick/Knoxville News Sentinel via AP)

"I am so grateful to the jury for their work and their service to our community, and I'm grateful for their seeing the truth, (that) Michael Williams is not guilty and has never been guilty of this crime," Eldridge said. "He's looking forward to moving on with his life."

Johnson and Williams were indicted on February 2015 after a woman said both men raped her during a party at Johnson's apartment in the early morning hours of Nov. 16, 2014. Johnson and Williams were suspended from the team less than 48 hours after the party and never played for Tennessee again. Johnson had been a star linebacker, while Williams was a part-time starter in the secondary.

Prosecutors made the Tennessee football program's clout and Johnson's local celebrity status major elements of their case. During her closing argument Friday afternoon, Knox County Assistant District Attorney General Leslie Nassios described the defendants as "entitled men, used to getting their way, coddled, idolized men who weren't used to hearing the word, 'No.'"

Eldridge countered that Williams and Johnson were being prosecuted despite a lack of evidence because they are former Tennessee football players. Stephen Ross Johnson, who represents Johnson but isn't related to him, said Nassios made

an “emotional” argument “because they don’t have evidence.”

Defense lawyers argued that the woman had consensual sex with both men at the same time and then lied, claiming she had been raped. Stephen Ross Johnson said the woman was “locked into a lie” that had spun out of control.

“She regrets it,” Eldridge said. “Ladies and gentlemen, regret isn’t rape.”

The woman said she was with a friend visiting from out of state that night and that they went up to Johnson’s room with the two defendants. The woman has acknowledged having consensual sex with Johnson on two occasions prior to the night in question.

The woman said that Johnson immediately started having sex with her and that it shocked and scared her. Her friend testified that Williams was attempting to force her into sexual activity around the same time before she got away and left the room, though the friend opted against pressing charges.

But the charges against Johnson and Williams stemmed from what the woman says happened after her friend left the room. The two defendants took turns raping her at first before both raped her at the same time, she said.



FILE – In this Aug. 24, 2015, file photo, former University of Tennessee football players Michael Williams, right, and A.J. Johnson stand in court before the start of Williams's rape trial in Knoxville, Tenn. Jurors acquitted Friday, July 27, 2018, the two former University of Tennessee football players who were indicted on aggravated rape charges nearly 3 1/2 years ago. (Michael Patrick/Knoxville News Sentinel via AP, File)

Defense lawyers cited a lack of a rape kit or other physical evidence, inconsistencies between what the woman said in court and what she'd told investigators earlier and discrepancies between the testimony of the woman and her friend. They mentioned how the woman and her friend both replaced their phones around the same time without preserving social-media communications, preventing the defense from obtaining that information.

And they noted how the woman initially told police she didn't want the defendants arrested. The woman testified she was initially reluctant to press charges because she feared she

wouldn't be believed.

Nassios questioned why anyone would think the woman would lie about something like this. She noted the woman had "lost everything that mattered to her" through this situation.

"How would you think (she) was ever locked in a lie?" Nassios said. "How many steps has she had in her life since this has happened – 3 ½ years – to stop if she wanted to? Where is the motivation to perpetuate a lie?"

Johnson's star power around Knoxville resulted from his status as a four-year starter at Tennessee whose 425 career tackles rank second among any Volunteer since the school started keeping track of the statistic in 1970. Johnson was considered a pro prospect, but his invitation to the 2015 NFL scouting combine was rescinded after his indictment.

Now he appears interested in reviving his football career. Johnson referred to comments from prosecutors and witnesses this week that he'd lost weight since the night of the party.

"I've been staying ready, staying in shape," Johnson said. "They were saying... that I'm smaller now than I was back then, but actually I weigh 255 and I'm still ready to go."

Vols believe they can thrive amid lack of preseason acclaim

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. (AP) – Tennessee doesn't mind adopting an underdog mentality a year after the Volunteers failed to meet preseason expectations.

The Volunteers [have been picked to finish third in the Southeastern Conference Eastern Division](#) by the league's media. They didn't have any first-team selections on the media's preseason all-SEC team.

One year ago, Tennessee was the preseason East favorite but ended up splitting its eight conference games.

"Right now we're in the weeds," senior safety Todd Kelly Jr. said. "Nobody's really seeing us, almost like a snake in the grass. Our goal is to end up biting somebody at the end of the day and making them pay."

Tennessee will open preseason practice on July 29 needing to find a quarterback to replace Joshua Dobbs, who started 35 games over the last four seasons. It must find a new pass rusher following the loss of [Philadelphia Eagles first-round draft pick Derek Barnett](#), the school's all-time career sack leader.



Photo: Austin Hensley
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But the Vols also will be free from the weight of expectations that burdened last year's team.

Tennessee was ranked ninth at the beginning of the season and raced to a 5-0 start before splitting its final eight games, including stunning defeats at [South Carolina](#) and [Vanderbilt](#) . An injury-riddled defense struggled to stop anyone down the stretch.

That sluggish finish and the uncertain quarterback situation could help explain why SEC media picked Tennessee to finish behind Georgia and defending division champion Florida in the East. Tennessee beat both Georgia and Florida last year.

Not only did Tennessee not have any first-team picks on the media's preseason all-SEC team, the Vols' only second-team selections were offensive lineman Jashon Robertson and return specialist Evan Berry.

"I just look at it as kind of irrelevant and go out and play my game," tight end Ethan Wolf said. "Of course we don't like hearing negative things about our team, but we're going to come out and play as hard as we possibly can come Week 1, and the rankings, they'll go from there."

Other players say they're using the lack of preseason acclaim as incentive.

"I think it's definitely motivating," defensive end Kyle Phillips said. "We don't have all the, I guess you would say, the high-profile players. But we have heart. I'd say this team is probably the best team I've had since I've been here team-wise, chemistry-wise and (with) people working together and in leadership roles and things like that. I'm really excited about this season."

Phillips and offensive lineman Jack Jones spent part of the summer among a contingent of Tennessee student-athletes visiting Vietnam and working with children in orphanages and volunteering at sports camps as part of the school's VOLeaders program.

Both said they can apply the lessons they learned in Vietnam to football.

"Going over there and working with these kids in sport, you really see that sports can bring anyone together," Jones said. "Stepping back, we've got all these new freshmen coming in, and they might be from all over the country, but football's bringing us together."