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The first Big-League catcher to win the "Rookie-of-the-Year" award

Johnny Bench, Binger's Best

By Kate Jackson Lewis

Holdenville lays claim to baseball "greats" Dizzy and Paul Dean; Harrah boasts Paul and Lloyd Waner; and Commerce, "Mighty Mickey Mantle." But Binger's buttons burst for Johnny Bench.

No doubt the feeling between man and town is mutual. Bench's frequent visits to Binger are convincing. For it was in Binger that he spun his first dreams of becoming a big league baseball player. With Mickey Mantle as his hero, the one-eighth Choctaw lad paid his dues in hard work, perspiration, and dedication to earn the title "World's Greatest Catcher." His achievement record indicates that the youngster set his goals high and maintained a steady pace of hard work until he reached them.

Soon after Bench retired, Binger held its fourth "Bash for

Bench" billed as "Thanks for the Memories." That night, Bingerites poured their congratulations on their native son and, like fond parents, queried, "What will you do now, Son?" Bench didn't quibble in replying, "I'll try to become the U.S. Amateur Golf Champ or something like that." His childhood buddy, Dean Ingram, now his financial manager, playfully quipped, "This is the last one (appreciation night) unless he comes up with a new career or wins a National Golf Championship."

Ingram, who perhaps knows Bench better than anyone else (parents excepted), described Johnny as an all-around athlete. The 6'1" 210-pounder can palm a basketball in one hand, dunk the ball, and in high school had a 23-point average, winning All-State honors. Too, his catching hand

(R.) is so large that he can hold seven baseballs at one time.

Ingram, himself an outstanding athlete, credits Johnny for influencing his athletic desires and goals toward becoming a four-year SOSU letterman and winning the Duke Award. Their philosophies were about the same. Ingram said, "Johnny always thought he was supposed to set an example for others, especially kids. He was playing for all the good ball players because of his size, ability, or just plain luck. . . . Since we two grew up in the same small-town atmosphere, our basic attitudes and values were about the same. Both of us enjoyed fishing, home cooking, TV. We also held strong family ties--still do. Since it was impossible to please everybody, our theory was to take care of the elderly, the kids, and the dogs and let the rest fend for themselves."

Will Bench eventually return to Binger to live? No, according to Ingram: "Since Johnny has so many friends and contacts, he feels at home almost everywhere. Remember, he has lived longer in Cincinnati than he did in Binger and until this year hadn't seen the 'green, green grass of home' since he was 17. . . . Bench just quit the Reds with a year left on his contract that would have given him approximately \$1 million." He said, "I didn't want to hang around just for the money if I wasn't earning it. Shoot, baseball gave me everything."

Nack of SPORTS ILLUSTRATED said: "The man quit, turning his back on a \$1 million contract. On September 17, 1985, he strapped on his gear for the last time, made the tying run (a homer) against the Astros, the ball almost hitting a sign that read 'God Love Him.' . . . Bench knew where he wanted to go--worked hard and got there--then knew when to quit.

Before a National 4-H Congress held in 1977 in Chicago, Bench was asked to name the people in his life who had influenced him most. Johnny said: "Well, my father and mother, of course, gave me the opportunity and support in every way for becoming a baseball player. Dad instilled it in my mind to be a catcher, said it was the quickest way. . . . it was what the major leagues needed. So I became a catcher."

"You have only one mom. She always had my uniform ready, food, and whatever I needed. It was always ready. She just kinda spoiled me a little.

"Babe Bristol was the manager of the Reds from '67 to '69. He demanded so much. And that demand helped push my years a little quicker and helped me be determined.

"Sparky Anderson became manager in '70 and has been very important in helping me continue developing my skills and my career.

"My brothers William and Teddy always let me play with them--always made me play on their level. They were five years older and a lot bigger but always made me play according to their rules. There weren't any special breaks. I had to pay the price if I wanted to play with them.

"Dr. Louis Gonzales, who operated on my lung, tried a special type of operation and it worked. Otherwise, the operation would have cut my back muscles and shortened or ended my career. But through his talent as a thoracic surgeon, his ability at being the best--as we talked about--his special operation was a success. I owe him a debt of gratitude for my last four years."

The lad developed such a strong and accurate arm that the Little League and American Legion coaches used Johnny for a pitcher, but Ted insisted that his son keep his sights on being a catcher. Though the all-around athlete pitched numerous "no hitters," he trusted and followed his dad's advice.

Ted and Katy Bench instilled in Johnny a sound sense of values. A serious, industrious youngster, he worked in the peanut harvest, threw papers, and helped to buy a pair of Levis now and then. He has great respect for his parents and vows that he could play better when his mom was in the stands. Once in the bottom of the ninth inning of the National League Playoffs game when the score was tied, Johnny heard his mother hollering his name, "Hit me a home run, Son." He did, advancing the Reds to the World Series.

What motivated "The Rifle" (one of his nicknames) to do his best at all times? Bench replied: "I've always wanted to be the best. That's just my mind. I try to tell the kids that whatever you're going to do you ought to try to be the best at it. Work hard enough for it, whether it's to be the best lawyer, the best Indian chief, the best writer. Put time and effort into it because you're only going to get out of it what you put into it. And if that isn't your goal, then at least give everybody a fair shake and a fair day's work and be happy with yourself.

"Too many people fight internally with themselves. To be the best, you have to put your abilities into your work everyday. Have them at peak performance at all times so that you are prepared mentally and physically. This is what I have to do, playing with professional teams."

Was Bench a cocky player? Some writers referred to his cool-headedness behind the plate as cockiness. The player's response was, "As a catcher, you have to be cocky." Because of his fast reflexes, quick wrists, and powerful arm, base-runners referred to Bench as "cocksure"--seldom trying to steal on him. Fewer than 50 of those who did were successful.

Before the first season was over, the 21-year-old Bench had proved himself as a capable clutch-hitter and "Rookie of the Year" winner, the first catcher ever to receive the award. Because of his ability to handle seasoned pitchers, Johnny was dubbed "The Little General" by his teammates. The father's tutelage was paying off, and his son was gaining acclaim. Soon he was to be called "The Wonder Boy," causing Bingerites to burst more vest buttons.

How could one so young win so many awards without becoming distracted?

Johnny said, "I try to keep things in the proper perspective. . . . it's not easy. I want to enjoy life, but I also want to make the most of myself in life."

To enlarge on his reference regarding his activities after retirement, Johnny told his Binger friends, "In winter, I'll do the things I've always done--the Grand National Quail Hunt, the Bob Hope Golf Tournament, the Bing Crosby event, and I'll shoot some more of the 'Baseball Bunch,'" a syndicated TV show to teach baseball to children in an entertaining and informal manner. He has increased his programs to number 55 on more than 82 stations, winning the Film Festival Award for a children's series.

With achievements ranging from kids' baseball to singing "Pops" with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and his recent induction into "The Hall of Fame," how is Binger's Boy Bench to be best remembered?

A TV announcer gave a fitting answer when he said, "When that kid throws a ball, everybody in baseball drools."

(Editor's note: The interview portions of this article are a synthesis of the following sources: DAILY OKLAHOMAN, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, JOHNNY BENCH: A BIOGRAPHY (by Libby), Johnny Bench's public speeches, correspondence between Kate Jackson Lewis and Dean Ingram)

continued

*ADDENDA--BIOGRAPHICAL AND STATISTICAL
INFORMATION--COMPILED BY*

KATE JACKSON LEWIS

JOHNNY BENCH — NUMBER ONE

DATES AND EVENTS

1968--National Rookie of the Year, the first catcher in history to win the award.

1970--Most Valuable Player, the youngest player who ever received the award.

1972--Won the MVP again.

1976--Named MVP in the World Series.

1980--Set catching-endurance record--100 or more games for the thirteenth consecutive season.

1980--Set a new Major League record of home runs by a catcher; was ten-time Golden Gove Award winner (no other catcher's achievement); ALL TIME top vote-getter in fans' ALL STAR balloting; ALL TIME highest slugging percentage (.792) in ALL STAR history; ALL TIME Runs-Batted-In and home run leader for the Reds.

DETAILS

Height: 6'1"

Weight: 210 lbs.

Birth Date: December 7, 1947

Birth Place: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Residence: Cincinnati, Ohio

1967: Joined the Major Leagues

Age 4: Moved to Binger

Parents: Ted and Katy Bench

Great-grandmother: Choctaw Indian (Johnny is one-eighth Choctaw)

Childhood Work: Picked cotton and peanuts to buy Levis and shirts; delivered ANADARKO NEWS.

Activities: Played shinny with flattened milk cans and various types of sticks for hitting the cans.

Retired: End of baseball season, 1983.

November 16, 1984: Hall of Fame Induction.

CIVIC ACTIVITY

Charitable: Heart Association, The American Cancer Society, Hike for the Handicapped, Kidney Foundation, and Muscular Dystrophy

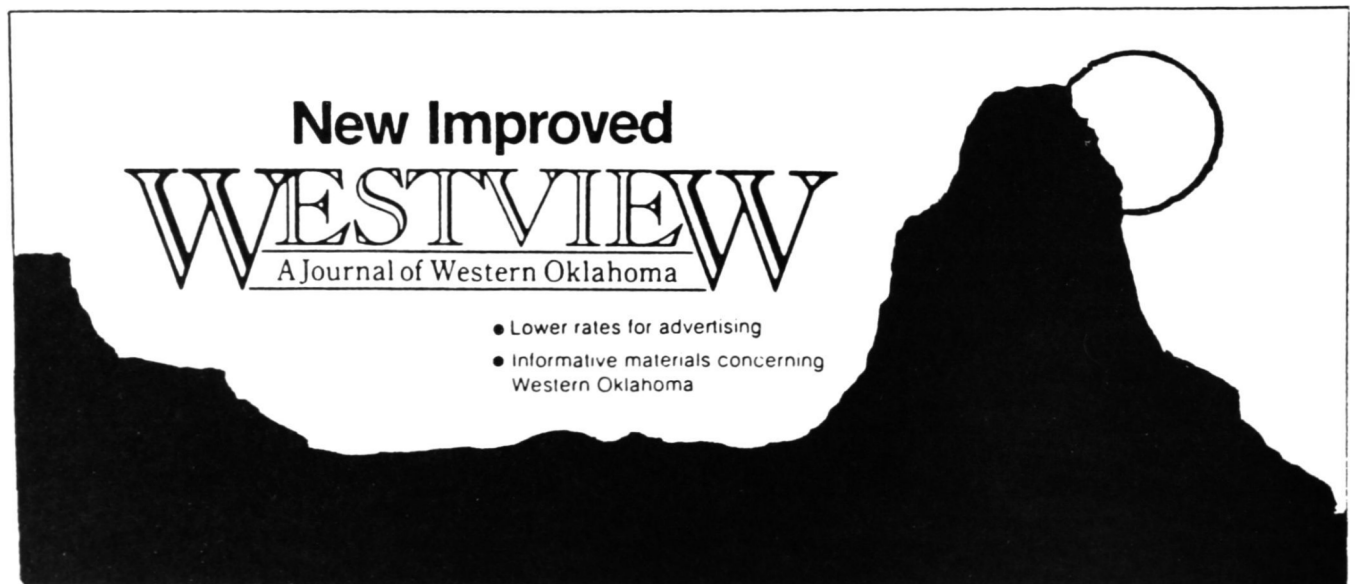
Cultural: Raises money for Cincinnati Public Television and Cincinnati Symphony, for which he has sung Pops. Had his own syndicated TV show. Made personal appearances throughout the United States and abroad, including a Far East tour with the Bob Hope Christmas Show.

TV Filings: Because of Bench's special love for kids, he makes "Baseball Bunch" films in Tucson (13 shows); Ronald McDonald House, Oklahoma City; and Athletics for Cancer, Los Angeles.

Honors: Honor award by Congressmen of Ohio, State Senate, Athlete of the Year Award, and Hall of Fame.

NOSTALGIC NOTES

Many people express fond feelings for Johnny Bench. John Feroli (PURCELL REGISTER) for example, said, "I'm sad when I turn to a TV baseball game and automatically look for Johnny--knowing for sure he won't ever be there again. He's like an old shoe--comfortable--a small-town boy, one we could all talk with." ❖



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