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TOP STORY

WKU BASEBALL

Hall of Famer Bench urges Tops to make most of opportunities

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Baseball Hall of Famer Johnny Bench speaks at the WKU baseball progra
Bench, a 1989 inductee into the Baseball Hall of Fame and winner of 10 c
consecutive World Series titles in 1975 and 1976, earned World Series MV
New York Yankees and remains the Reds' all-time leader in home runs a

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MORE INFORMATION



SLIDE SHOW: Hall of Famer Bench speaks at WKU First Pitch Dinner

Johnny Bench connected more often than most during his storied Major League Baseball career.

The longtime catcher the the Cincinnati Reds parlayed a powerful bat with a dazzling defensive game behind the plate into a 17-year career in the big leagues – one that ultimately earned the Oklahoma native a first-ballot selection into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y.

Bench whiffed plenty, too – at pitches during his playing career, and occasionally at trivia long after he put down the baseball bat for the final time after the 1983 season.

So it was – nearly – when Bench made an appearance on the popular network game show “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” in 2001. Appearing on a special “Sports Superstar Edition” of the show, Bench was playing for his scholarship fund. He was rolling, too, deftly handling questions ranging from “What fruit is

known for its fuzzy skin?" (a peach) to "Who was Bert's roommate on 'Sesame Street?' " (Ernie).

Bench got a little help from the audience on the $125,000 question, then got this for $250,000 – "Since 1981, every Chevrolet Corvette has been produced as a single automobile in what U.S. state?"

He had no idea, but Bench thought he knew who did – his friend, Greg. He was correct, as his "Phone-a-Friend" buddy convinced Bench that Corvettes are made in Kentucky – specifically, in Bowling Green.

Bench took his advice, answered the question correctly and banked $250,000 for his scholarship fund that he estimates has put 800 kids through college over the years.

"It was very important – every time I think about Bowling Green or see a Corvette, I always think about how great it's been," said Bench, who was in Bowling Green on Saturday to serve as guest speaker for Western Kentucky's First Pitch Banquet to benefit the school's baseball program.

Bench, 76, met with WKU's players and coaching staff and fans of the program, then spoke at E.A. Diddle Arena to the assembled crowd about his own path to while offering a few pointers on how others can find their way to success in whatever field they choose.

For one night, it was Big Red Machine meets Big Red at Diddle.

Bench spent a good portion of his time getting to know WKU baseball coach Marc Rardin, his staff and the Hilltoppers getting set to open the season next month. Bench was impressed by the quick progress made by Rardin and his staff in their first season in 2023, winning 33 games to nearly double the 2022 win total of 18.

Baseball came up, for sure, but that's not really the focus of Bench's message either to WKU's players.

"We talked about baseball, we talked about education and their opportunity that they've been given," Bench said. "Maybe a kid might make it out of here to the professional

ranks, maybe there's two – I don't know. But the thing is, they've been given a great opportunity. A lot of these kids are transfers. I was 17 when I left home to go to the Reds. It's a great adjustment that you have to do, so if you can motivate these kids ... maybe help them in baseball, but more important in life and be able to get them to get an education and go forth with this opportunity."

Bench didn't have the opportunity to play college baseball. Picked by the Reds in the second round of the 1965 amateur draft out of high school in Binger, Okla., Bench immediately embarked on his professional career. He earned his first big-league callup just two years later, and in 1968 he won the National League Rookie of the Year Award.

It was just the start of a dazzling list of accomplishments for Bench, still widely considered the greatest catcher to ever play in the Major Leagues. A two-time NL Most Valuable Player (1970 and 1972), 14-time All-Star, 10-time Gold Glove Award winner and two-time World

Series champion (he was the World Series MVP in 1976), Bench cracked 389 home runs and tallied 1,376 RBIs while collecting 2,048 hits in his long career – all 17 seasons spent with the Reds.

Naturally, he still keeps tabs on his old team.

“They’re such an enigma sometimes,” Bench said. “I really got turned on by the ballclub this year. Matt McClain and some of the kids ... (Ellly) De La Cruz is also exciting and (Will) Benson and (T.J) Friedl. You want so badly for them to be good because you saw the enthusiasm within the town of Cincinnati which hasn’t been there in a long time. I mean, they’re pretty fair-weather fans, let’s face it – 44,000 (for) opening day, then 12,000 for game 2. Hopefully this will entice them.

“They made a couple moves and changeovers with signees and everything else. But gosh, to see them in contention is so enjoyable. I’ll be a Red forever at heart obviously, but to

see them playing with the excitement of the fans and we haven't had that. It's just sort of been dragging along."

One of the big moves this offseason has been the Reds' apparent decision to not re-sign longtime star first baseman Joey Votto, who has been the face of the franchise for more than 15 years.

Bench can emphasize with Votto, but he understands the decision by the Reds.

"Joey's one of the great players to ever put on a uniform in Cincinnati," Bench said. "There's just times when there's other positions that have to be filled. I cannot tell you the number of catchers that I ruined their lives by me staying there for (17) years, because there's probably some kids in the minor leagues during that period of time that may have had great potential and may have had a great opportunity but (didn't) because I was there.

"Sometimes when there's a guy in waiting where you have to make changes in a lineup, you have to

make moves. And at 40 years old, he's had a great career in Cincinnati. But if we're going to make the change and transition, if we're going to make a change for the future and we're revamping this ballclub then it had to be the right decision to be made."

Bench spent Saturday doing his part to help shape the future of WKU's baseball players. In Rardin, he sees a perfect leader for the program.

"His passion was all there and it kept revolving back to the kids and seeing them transfer in," Bench said. "But they're here with focus – their job is to do baseball and their job is to get an education. He was passionate about it and I think it hit right at home for what you wanted to hear about kids today."

That passion resonates with Bench, who relishes the opportunities to speak to others about becoming the best version of themselves. It's the overriding message Bench brought to Diddle on Saturday night.

“Be the best individual you can be,” Bench said. “People ask me, ‘My kid wants to be a catcher. What do a I tell them?’ I say catch every ball. And it may sound crazy but if no ball gets by me everybody says ‘What a great catcher.’ If you do that in life, whether you’re an insurance salesman or a lawyer or whatever, if you’re the best at your position and you know what you’re doing then you have an opportunity to be successful.”

Now, back to Corvettes. Bench did in fact own the iconic sports car, even if he’s admittedly “never been a car guy.”

“I mean, when you’re pulling cotton for 2 cents a pound and you’re combining peanuts you’re not buying a lot of cars,” Bench said of his modest upbringing. “So I never was a car guy, I always had a reason to get somewhere. But my neighbor had this Corvette and I bought it. And if you caught as long as I have, it’s easy to get into ... boy, is it hard to get out of. This body doesn’t want to uncurl into that.”{&end}

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