

Johnny Bench

Johnny discusses his life in Oklahoma and his storied career with the Cincinnati Reds.

Chapter 1 – 0:57

Introduction

Announcer: Johnny Lee Bench was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma on December 7, 1947, and grew up in the small town of Binger, Oklahoma. His childhood dream was to become a major league baseball player. Under the guidance of his father, who decided that the position of catcher was the most direct route to the majors, Johnny was selected and signed in the 1965 amateur draft by the Cincinnati Reds. After two seasons in the minors, Bench made Cincinnati's Major League roster for the 1968 season. This marked the beginning of one of the most successful careers in baseball history.

Elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in January 1989, Bench is considered "Baseball's Greatest Catcher" and was named the starter behind the plate of the All-Century Team.

Johnny Bench talks about his life in Binger, Oklahoma and his storied career with the Cincinnati Reds on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2

Binger, Oklahoma - 8:45

Johnny Lee Bench: I'm Johnny Lee Bench, born December 7, 1947.

John Erling: And your present age?

JB: In a week, 65. Well, I guess that makes me still 64.

JE: We're recording this interview by phone. I'm in the KWGS studios, NPR station on the TU campus in Tulsa. Where are you, Johnny, right now?

JB: I'm in Palm Springs, Rancho Mirage, as we speak.

JE: All right.

JB: California.

JE: Are you there because you like to play golf a lot?

JB: Well, I play golf, but, well, it's paradise. Where else would you be? We are really residents of Naples, Florida. I've been in Palm Springs off and on since 1971. I went with Bob Hope on the Christmas Tour around the world in December of '70. He asked me to play in his golf tournament and I started playing, played about twenty-five years. Great friends of mine of Oklahoma, the Voslers, developed Mission Hills and Landmark. I played out here a lot. They said, "You need to have a condo." So after I retired and I'd saved up all my money I bought a condo. The next year a rookie bought the complex, so a little difference in funds at those times and earnings. But I have been very pleased. This is paradise to me, it's 352 days of sunshine. We have two small boys, three and six, that are in school, so it's a little bit of a shuttle every day, a little bit of golf every day, if you want to. If not, you can stay outside and just enjoy life.

JE: That's great. Where were you born, Johnny?

JB: I was born at St. Anthony's in Oklahoma City.

JE: Upon birth, I believe, you had two older brothers?

JB: Two older brothers, Teddy and William. They were five and six years older than I was. I have a sister, Marilyn, that's nineteen months younger than I am.

JE: Your mother's name?

JB: Everybody called her Katie. She was Kathleen Bessie Chaney. Grandfather was Lon Chaney, not the Lon Chaney, and Verta was my grandmother. Clay and Pearl Bench were on my father's side. And they both lived in Oklahoma City until they passed.

JE: Your mother's background was Oklahoma and Oklahoma City?

JB: Oh yes, yeah. She grew up there, she went to Capitol Hill and she and Dad met. He was from Blanchard, served two hitches in the war. Met Mom, they got married, he got out of the service, I guess, in '41 or '42. And after I was born we moved to Lindsay and then to Erin Springs. When I was three years old we moved to Binger, Oklahoma. While in Binger, Dad had been working for his uncle in the propane business and Dad started the propane business in out in Coweta County.

JE: Your mother's personality, how would you describe her?

JB: Perfect. In every way. Loving, great cook, did everything that I guess you sort of envision as a mother raising the four of us and supporting us. Always cheering, always there to fix up a scraped knee or just to give a hug when you need. And absolutely, I don't know how

anyone could be more fortunate than I am.

JE: Then your father, your father's full name?

JB: He was Theodore William Bench. He served, like I said, two hitches in the war, ran the gas company and he would get up around four thirty in the morning and go out before it got too hot. Delivered propane for the irrigation wells and all the houses around the area. He loved to fish, started a baseball team when I was six years old. We rode around in the back of a pickup truck in our little jeans and T-shirts. We played baseball in the backyard and his dream was to be a major league catcher. But serving eight years in the war took that dream out of perspective.

JE: So in describing his personality then, how would you do that?

JB: You know, he was a hard working, very hard working man, who also loved to fish. I mean, he just loved to fish. Loved to play dominoes when he had a spare moment and was in town. A good disciplinarian, just to the point of, you know, keeping the kids in line. And a great supporter, great supporter, hoping that one day one of his sons would be a major league catcher. Teddy was left-handed so that didn't work. And William was a catcher, but had he been on second base, well, then, things might have been different. But I was a catcher, although I hardly caught—I pitched most of the time. Dad was basically saying, "Keep your eye on the ball and throw past your ear," and that was the extent of it. And he let us play. Our daily routine was when we had a break we played Homerun Derby and a game called Tin Can that we played in the backyard with the neighbors. Even on the work-up games that we played they let me play when I was four but my outs didn't count. So I started hitting and playing and competing against them at their level, whether it be just football in the backyard or out in the playground. I was given the chance to play and then when it was basketball season we played basketball. And when it was work season it was work season. I delivered all the papers, I painted gas tanks for Dad, I mowed lawns. When it came time we pulled cotton and worked on the peanut fields combining, loading. And then when I was fifteen I started driving the gas trucks for Dad. We ran all the gas to some of his customers. It was just hard working, it was just great, but we always had time to do some sport or fish with him or do anything we really wanted to.

JE: Is it true that in your DNA you are one-eighth Native American?

JB: I guess I'm a sixteenth but, unfortunately, we didn't get on the rolls. My grandfather Clay Bench, his mother was a full-blood Choctaw, supposedly. But my grandfather was fostered out, I guess they were a family of nine and they were fostered out. They never really got on the rolls. But I've always been proud of my Indian heritage.

JE: Where is Binger in Oklahoma?

JB: It's about two and a half miles beyond Resume Speed. It's straight west of Norman, southwest of Oklahoma City about fifty-five, sixty miles.

JE: As you were in elementary grade you were obviously playing baseball even then?

JB: Yes. We played. The game of Tin Can was our, you know, it was an old Milnot can, they had the church key to poke up the top of it. Just make the holes and then you've got a bat that was splashed in half at the end so you had a flat surface. And you'd throw the can and if you hit it past a certain area and it's a base hit and a double. And if you hit it farther it tripled and a grand slam if you hit it into the shed. After you hit it a few times you could throw a curve ball, screw ball, sliders, and by the end of the game it was just one solid, round mass of tin or metal. You know, we basically played with our bare hands, which made it fun and gave us a chance to really start learning to hit breaking balls and change of speed. And it sort of molded me to become what I was as a hitter.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). You mentioned hands, from an early age you had unusually large hands and feet?

JB: Well, DNA will do that. My dad was only five nine but his hands, when we would measure, my hands at the end were just barely past his. My brothers and sisters never really had that, but I was blessed with it. Everybody talked about it, me holding seven baseballs in one hand, holding it straight out. And so it became sort of a conversation piece.

JE: And that became a nickname for you?

JB: I became The Hands, I became The Little General because when I came up to the Reds they said they wanted a leader. So I sort of said, "Okay." And it was just in my DNA to do things right. I think that was the way I was brought to be, to do it the way it's supposed to be done, be on time, do what you're supposed to be doing. So I had those nicknames, and the Binger Banger, everybody sort of had a headline.

JE: Even in the second grade I think you knew what you wanted to be because the second grade teacher asked you what you wanted to be?

JB: Oh yeah, Mrs. Ralsher, everybody had their deal. When I said, "I want to be a major league baseball player," they laughed. Nobody really ever even thought about that. Eighth grade, Mrs. Tate asked everybody what they wanted to be and I again said, "Major league baseball player." And they laughed again. I had gotten in school a year early. My mom thought a December birth, well, she thought it was January 1st for enrollment. When they sent me home with a note pinned to my shirt saying I was too young to be in first grade, of course, I cried. But she went to see the school and they found out I was in the top 10 percent of the class and they said, "Well, he's all right to go." So I got in school a year early. So in eighth grade I was only 5'2 with these hands and big, big feet and big head, and so everybody laughed again, because really the only people scouting me at that time was Barnum and Bailey, the way I looked. But I grew nine inches in the next two years so I was a junior. Mr. Rhodes asked the class and when I said it they didn't laugh so much this time because I was starting to really do well at baseball.

Chapter 3**Almost a Cub - 5:25**

John Erling: Your dad, obviously, was very supportive, I mean, he started this Little League team.

Johnny Lee Bench: And we would lose. It was just the beginning of baseball for a lot of the kids and we would lose. Dad would always say, "That's okay, we'll get 'em tomorrow. Let's go have a cheeseburger." Then at the end of the year, with all our playing and practice and Tin Can and everything else, we played a team that was undefeated and we beat them. They were over there crying and I looked at my dad and I said, "What's wrong with them?" And he said, "They haven't learned to lose yet, Son. Let's go get a cheeseburger."

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: And so I learned to lose, I learned to win, and I played to win and that was the way baseball was to me. When I got to be nine years old I was advanced to play with the eleven- and twelve-year-olds. Then when I was twelve I played with the thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds. Then when I was fourteen I played American Legion baseball with the seventeen- to eighteen-year-olds, really.

JE: And with those boys you were batting a pretty good average, 355 your first year, 400 the second year.

JB: I have no idea.

JE: Well, that's a fact.

JB: Yeah, they had three catchers. I had to play at Anadarko, which is the county seat of Coweta County. They had three catchers so I didn't get to catch much. I did catch one game. After one catcher quit the second catcher broke his collar bone, the third catcher had three passed balls in an inning, they put me in and I hit a homerun in that game that beat Bobby Murcer's American Legion team. And then the other catcher came back—well, at fourteen years old you get seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds. Then I played a lot of first base, a lot of third base, until all the catchers graduated and I wound of pitching, playing first base. Then I got to catch my last year in 1965.

JE: And as a pitcher, you were throwing the ball at 85 miles per hour, a sharp-breaking curve ball, good control, and your pitching record was 84 wins and 3 losses.

JB: I tell everybody 75. I never really added it up but I tell everybody, "I didn't lose my first game until I was sixteen, and that was in extra innings in a nine-inning game with a passed ball. And, unfortunately, it was in the Regional Finals. We wanted to win the state championship, but unfortunately, it didn't happen that year.

JE: As strong a pitcher you were your father could have promoted that but he felt being a catcher would be the best for you.

JB: Well, everybody knew I was a catcher, I was just thought of as a catcher. One state tournament I pitched the finals of the invitational, finals of the county, the finals of the district, the finals of the bi-district, finals of the regional, finals of the state. We won the state championship, but that year I hit 633 so I think they may have wanted to fall back on pitching. When I pitched I even took infield as a catcher so the scouts could see me.

JE: To make your throwing arm stronger, I believe, your dad moved second base twice the normal distance from home plate?

JB: No, but he would stand about 200 feet behind and we would play catch and he would want me to throw it on a line. Like anything, the arm is a muscle and you develop it. I was born with the hands, I've had lots of strength from working in the fields. My second year, I mean, I never tried it until my second year in pro ball but I can stand at home plate and throw it over the left field walls.

JE: Oh wow. Did others try to challenge you on that?

JB: Oh yeah, everybody wanted to see how far they could throw. When you're blessed with the DNA, as you say, you just feel capable of doing almost anything. And I never thought it was such a big deal, I mean, a lot of the scalps did. The Cubs really wanted me and Billy Caps, the scout for the Chicago Cubs loved me. He brought his head of scouting down to watch me and I'd just come off a class trip, a senior trip, and I hadn't played in like ten or twelve days. And I went 1 for 4. They said, "Please stay over, we've got a game tomorrow night." He said, "Naw, I got to go check these other guys." So the next night I went 4 for 4 with two homeruns and two doubles. Billy, he wanted to draft me in the first round. But they thought, "No, nobody will know him." I mean, it's the first draft they ever had in 1965.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: They said, "No, we don't have to waste a draft pick on him." When a lot of the scouts and some of the directors were at some kind of a baseball meeting they were just chatting and having a few cocktails and they started talking, "Hey, what about this guy? What about this guy?" And they said, "What do you think about this kid, Bench?" And Jim McLaughlin, who was the Minor League director, said, "Oh we're not that high on him," and walked out of the room. And people said, "Who the hell is Bench?" So they sent Tony Robello in from Texas, and Bob Thurman in from Kansas. They saw me play two games, I think I got two hits. But they loved the way I threw. That's how I became a Cincinnati Red, drafted in the second round. Actually, I was drafted twice. I was drafted John Bench out of Binger, and I was drafted as Johnny Lee Bench out of Anadarko. So I became a Red and at seventeen years of age I was ready to negotiate my big bonus.

JE: So Chicago was going to draft you but didn't think they needed to move that fast and the Reds beat them to the punch. Is that true?

JB: Yeah that's the way it was.

JE: Wow.

JB: People say, "Well, what would have happened had you become a Cub?" And they had a great catcher, Randy Hundley. And I said, "Well, I know one thing, they would have won a World Series by now." So I guess that's a little dig on their part. But it was Billy Caps that really was so disappointed. He used to visit me when he was around. He was such a great man. Unfortunately, Billy's passed away, but I felt so bad for him that he had found me, I mean, he loved me and I didn't become a Cub.

Chapter 4

Bus Crash - 2:25

John Erling: April 1, 1965, you and your teammates were coming home after a game and the bus brakes gave out. Tell us what happened.

Johnny Lee Bench: We had a great shortstop named Houston Dumbo. Everybody called him Spud. He was about five foot eight and could run like the wind. He could play basketball, could hit, could do everything. He was sick that day so we would have stopped before we even started down the incline to let Spud off, but he wasn't there. So we started down the incline and Lloyd Dempsey, our coach, said, "We don't have any brakes." And I yelled out, "Yeah, April's Fool," and looked up and his foot was on the pedal. I said, "Gear it down." Well, he couldn't quite gear it down. "Pull the emergency brake!" I'm yelling. Nothing was working. My dad had always said, "If you ever have a problem, get on the floorboard." So I jumped over and grabbed David Gunner, threw him down on the floor, jumped on top of him as we tried to make the turn at the intersection. He couldn't negotiate it. The front right fender hit the guardrail and we flipped over and rolled down the incline about three times. A very sharp incline on the other side of the T. I can still see Jerry Scott, he was holding on to the bar in the front, going round and round. When we stopped, we stopped on the wheels. My feet were hanging out the backdoor and I was still holding on to David. Unfortunately for us, two boys lost their lives in the crash.

JE: Hmm. That crash must have stayed with you in your mind for a long, long time.

JB: Well, it did. I mean, it more than anything made me numb. How fragile we are. We lost two great kids. I mean, as I said, Spud wasn't there, Danny Lopez wasn't there, he was sick as well. As it turned out, within three or four years both of those boys lost their lives. Spud fell asleep at the car and I was trying to get him a tryout with the Reds. He joined the army, set the record for Ft. Polk, Louisiana, for four minutes and fifty-three seconds

with a field pack on. Danny went to the war in Vietnam and came back and a lady pulled out in front of him and he died. So you think about these guys, you know, you remember them as life and not in death. It sort of just makes me phlegmatic about all the things that sometimes happen.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

Chapter 5

Bench the Okie - 4:16

John Erling: In high school you were a good athlete, you were a good student, the valedictorian of your graduating class, and you received some good scholarship offers for basketball and baseball from several colleges. I'm curious about OU, were they offering you scholarships?

Johnny Lee Bench: They did, they did, yeah. I was All-State in basketball and All-State in baseball. I had them approach me, I had Oklahoma State, I went up to Oklahoma State, you know, they had a catcher at that time and I just never got the feeling of, "Okay, we really need you, we really want you." So we sat and watched the game for a little bit and Soosh Hayley, our junior high principal and one of my mentors throughout my growth, being as I was from Binger, I looked at him, I said, "Coach, let's go."

JE: Hmm.

JB: They had just not enough interest so we just drove back home. That was the only time I've ever been in Stillwater. I love it, I mean, I love the school, I support our schools and root for them. But I wound up, basically, going to commit to go to Phillips University because I could play both baseball and basketball. Joe Record was the coach up there at the time and really a nice guy. Oklahoma City recruited me, OCU recruited me to play basketball. Paul Anson came down to visit. I remember years later, well, it was five years later, 1970, I was voted the Sportsman of the Year in Oklahoma and I was back for the dinner and Abe Lemons come up to me and said, "Son, you just don't get it, do you?" I said, "What's that, Coach?" He said, "Well, you could have come up here on a scholarship to play basketball at OCU. You could have gotten your degree and you could have been a coach by now at Gotebo." And only Abe could do this, I mean, it was beautiful. I followed him wherever he went. He was one of my heroes, as, of course, the legend Bud Wilkinson was. And my all-time hero was Mickey Mantle. He was the one that inspired me at three years of age, watching the black and white television with my dad. They announced,

“Now batting, the next superstar to switch hitting, a centerfielder from Oklahoma, Mickey Mantle.” I looked at my dad and said, “You can be from Oklahoma and play in the major leagues? That’s what I want to be.” And that’s where it all started.

JE: Wow. So you definitely can point to your upbringing in Oklahoma. Obviously your family, the combination of both is the reason that you were able to succeed?

JB: Oh, no question, I mean, every day I’m still an Okie. I’m a Sooner. It’s just ingrained in you for the type of people that you meet, the way they were, their demeanor, their attitude on life. And my dad on watching the money and the financials, working hard, taking care of your family, and looking out for others. So there are great friends in my life that I still have and still live in Binger. We’ve got the Johnny Bench Museum down there. We’re sending about another eighty to a hundred pieces of my memorabilia. We figure with that museum we’ll draw five to six more people into Binger. I mean, it will just be, just like a magnet, just draw them right in down to Binger.

JE: Right. As a young boy, we all when we played baseball, pretended we were playing for a certain team or we pretended we were a certain somebody. Were you imagining yourself playing for the Reds or the Yankees? Or who did you think you were playing for, as a youngster?

JB: Well, Mickey Mantle and the Yankees.

JE: Okay.

JB: I was the Yankees and Crane was the Dodgers. We’d play Tin Can or Wiffle Ball and he had his lineup of the Dodgers, I had my lineup with the Yankees, who was batting? And, of course, you got very little news, we didn’t have the radio. I didn’t listen to KMOX in St. Louis. They didn’t play the Yankees. We got a newspaper once a week. Never really got to stay up and watch the sports report from Ross Porter. I loved it so much when I got to Los Angeles and Ross Porter was working with Ben Scully and I was, “Hello, everybody!” Of course, still to this day, every time I see him, “Hello, everybody.” And, you know, Danny Williams, and gosh, I mean, people that were part of your life. But the upbringing was all in Binger. I mean, we drove to Oklahoma City. My boys ride in the back of the pickup and Mom and Dad and Marilyn would be in the front of the pickup. We’d go see grandma and grandpa, both of them. We never really did much of anything else except work and play.

Chapter 6**A Cincinnati Red - 5:50**

John Erling: Then it was on June 21, 1965, you would have been seventeen years old. You became a Cincinnati Red.

Johnny Lee Bench: Well, I was drafted and the scout, Tony Robello came in and he said, "I hear you hurt your arm." A great negotiating, straight out of the shoot. "No, no, I'll throw it for you in the front yard if you want to see me throw it right now." They came with an offer and my dad said, "No, that's not good enough." And so, he said, "Well, I'm going to make a call." So he went down to the phone booth down at the corner, the only phone booth in town. He came back and said, "Well, we'll over you six thousand dollars and," 'cause I want to go to school, "we'll give you a thousand dollars for each eight semesters you go to school." My dad said, "No, it's not enough, but it's up to you, it's your life." I said, "Dad, that's what I grew up to be." I accepted the offer, wound up getting on my first airplane and flying to Tampa, Florida. Getting off the plane, going to the ballpark that evening, they were in a double-header, it was the seventh inning of the second game, I warmed up the pitcher in the bullpen and I warmed up the pitcher at home plate in the eighth inning. And then I caught the ninth inning of that ballgame.

JE: Hmm.

JB: I was making five hundred dollars a month and I was professional.

JE: Here you are, this young, first time away from home?

JB: Oh yeah. Bought myself six pairs of Levis and one pair of dress pants.

JE: And probably homesick?

JB: Yeah, but like I said, this is what I grew up to be. I sure missed Mom when I woke up the next morning. I stayed on a slide-away sofa at some of the players' apartment. Clothes were still on the floor and breakfast wasn't ready and, all of a sudden, "Man, what do you do here?" And the boys kind of took me under their arms. We had guys that some had signed, some were on their way out because they were going down, down, down from AA to Class A. We left the next day, actually, on a road trip to Miami. We had like five station wagons, filled with the players and the coaches drove. And here we take off with all our gear in the back and guys strung out and we go to Miami, Florida, to play the Baltimore team at that time.

JE: You've already brought up the name of Bobby Murcer. In that same year, 1965, he was making in the fall of that year, September 8th, his debut with the New York Yankees. He's about a year or two older than you. Knowing that he was kind of following the same path

you were, did you know him at that point?

JB: No. I got to see Bobby only when we played him. Well, I did see him in spring training down in Tampa when we'd go to Ft. Lauderdale. I was just so proud of him, he was such a great player. Just graceful and swing the bat and do everything defensively. And I was so proud of him. In those days, in '65, around that time, we had percentage wise more major leaguers than any other state. And I was proud of that. The thing for me was you keep your nose clean. I talked yesterday to my old roommate from 1965, Norm Singleton. He was drafted as a first baseman and catcher. He said, "Well, I could never have made it the first log because you were going to be catching for the rest of your life. I was never going to make it cause I couldn't hit well enough to do it." He was a good first baseman. But it was just what it was, you know?

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: I had great mentors with the older players. Cactus Jack Caseeny was my manager. I just kept my nose in the right places. I found the right people. I always wanted to surround myself with good, solid guys as friends. And I had it in Carl Barns and Norm Singleton and, heck, we rented a room at the Park and Sleep Motel and the three of us slept. We had two rollaway beds and a regular bed in a room that's not as big as probably the studio you're broadcasting from.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: But, hey, you just came home, you went out to eat, you came back to the room. You slept, you got up and you went to the park. Hey, it's professional. I'm a professional. I don't know what the glory is but the fact is that you've got to make your way up.

JE: And I should point out that Bobby Murcer was born in Oklahoma City, as you were. By the way, major league baseball players born in Oklahoma, I counted up, there were 241 major leagues players from Oklahoma. Isn't that amazing?

JB: It is. When you think of the size of the state. You find that in certain areas where, all of a sudden, football becomes king and every youngster wants to play football. And when you have the quality of baseball and you have people that you can look up to in the major leagues, for the parents, for the grandparents it's a lot of talk about, "Yeah, I used to see that old boy." And, "I used to do this." And, "He's from Oklahoma, we support him." And he'd start to say, "Well, I want to play too," and that brings him out in play. Course we've always had just great athletes, great genes out there. Hardworking people who are tough and strong and I think it just sort of, in a way, breeds success in baseball players.

JE: Right. While we don't have the time to go into all the names, it starts with Jerry Adair, born in Santa Springs, Oklahoma, and ends with Chief Yellow Horse from Pawnee, Oklahoma.

JB: Yeah, but the big chief, man, I mean, how about Allie Reynolds—

JE: Yeah.

JB: And Mickey Mantle and then Willie Stargell was actually born in Oklahoma. Orin Spawn was just the nicest man in the world. What a career he had as all the left-handers, maybe the best left-hander ever. That's cool, that really is cool. And my old buddy Cal McLish, I hated to lose him. You know, you're proud of it, you run into those guys, Demeter and, you're right, we could go down the list but we don't have time. You know, it's always a big thank you for the guys that preceded.

JE: Right. I'm tempted to go more. There was Joe Carter out of Oklahoma City.

JB: Yeah.

JE: Bobby Cox of the Braves out of Tulsa. Al Dark too, as a matter of fact.

JB: The Waner brothers, yeah.

Chapter 7

The Major Call Up - 7:00

John Erling: So, you were Class A, AA, AAA, Buffalo Bison, but there was a day you were called up to the Reds in 1967. How did that come about?

Johnny Lee Bench: Manager called me in, at that time, Lou Fitzgerald, and started it. And Don Zimmer said, "You got the call, you got called up for the Reds." I packed my car, drove from Buffalo down to Cincinnati. I checked in at the Sheraton Hotel where they had a room for me, and went to the park.

JE: You would have been nineteen?

JB: Nineteen years old, yeah. They gave me number 5 because all catchers wore single digits. John Edwards was 7, Pat Letic was 6, Jim Coco was 8, the manager was number 4, so I was given number 5. And I was put right into the lineup.

JE: You started against what team?

JB: The Phillies, as I recall. I'm trying to think of a left-hander that pitched. He threw a fastball right there and I missed it. Ah, I was so, I mean, it was right there and I said, "Wow! I'm not over matched." Because quite honestly in the Miami leagues the guys throw hard. They don't have the command, which that's what separates them. Maybe their breaking ball only rotates nine or ten revolutions instead of eleven to thirteen, which are the great ones. So I didn't feel out of my element. I felt like it was a great match up.

JE: Did you get a hit in that game?

JB: I don't believe I did. I think I got a double the next day. You've got to remember, I've got

beaned three times, so sometimes I have trouble remembering when my starting time is on today's golf or something.

JE: Wow. For the record, you went 0 and 3 in your first major league game.

JB: Very disappointing. I'm surprised they didn't send me down.

JE: Here's a quote from Ralph Kiner of the Yankees, "You never forget your first hit in the major leagues. It was in my third at bat, that was kind of a relief. You could start off 0 for 34."

JB: I did get a double, I think, for the next day. You know, as a catcher, every at bat is last at bat and that's behind you because now, my job was to go out and get a win for that pitcher out there. I can tell you I got three homeruns three times. That I can remember. I remember World Series, of course. There was a straight quote: If what you did yesterday is big to you now then you haven't done much today.

JE: Even Willie Mays, he played his first major league game in '1951. He went 0 for 5 at the plate. He started his career 1 for 25, and he told his manager, he says, "I can't do it, Mr. Leo, you'd better bench me."

JB: And the great ones realize. I played in San Juan and the instruction leader down there in the Winter Bowl really, we were sitting in a hotel at a disco. People were asking Sal Bando for autographs, they were all over him. There was a guy named Joe Costello that was out of the Giants organization, AAA, and he just got called up for like a couple of weeks. Joe said, "Man, if they only knew who we were." I said, "Joe, who in the hell are we? We haven't done anything." In order to have done something you accomplish it for a long period of time. People say, "What about this catcher?" And I said, "Well, in seven, eight years we'll be able to judge them." It's the longevity, it's the success that you have that really makes the career. The year I was MVP I think I had two different stretches where I went 1 for 24 and 1 for 28 and I still hit 293. There are slumps. And I've said that a slump is like a soft bed, it's easy to get into but it's hard to get out of."

JE: Even Mickey Mantle, and we're proud of the fact that he was born in Spavinaw, but he grew up in Commerce, Oklahoma. He was sent down to the Yankees because he was not able to find the power he once had in the minors and he told his dad, "I don't think I can play baseball anymore." So his father drives to Kansas City, and he started packing Mickey's clothes. And according to Mantle's memory, the father said, "I thought I raised a man. I see I raised a coward instead. You can come back to Oklahoma and work the mines with me." That immediately broke Mantle's slump and he went on to hit 311 with 23 homers.

JB: Yeah you've got to have confidence. You've got to believe. I have a thing I've talked about in 1966, in the Hampton Newcourt News, it's called an inner conceit. Believing that you're better than the pitcher, believing that you can always hit him. You'll make outs, of course,

but always throwing any runner out. You always believe in yourself and what you do and how you do it. I never, never once, never once thought I couldn't do it. And it wasn't that I was better than anybody, I just had the confidence to be able to play in a lineup every day and produce. So that's just a belief that separates the greats from the guys who are packing their bags and going home.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). And then about Mickey Mantle, he continued to '68, and this was just the beginning of your career, '67 and '68, but in the majors did you get to know him? Did you get to interact with him much at all?

JB: I met him the first time in spring training, went over and got a ball signed. It was just really special, it was before the game at a spring training game. Mickey was just a good old boy, you know. I played golf with him in Dallas. He came to my golf tournament when I had the Heart Fund Invitational down in Tampa, Florida. I have pictures of him and my dad and me pitching pennies on the sidewalk. You know, Mickey's bigger than life. First of all, for what he was, how he played, and he played hurt. And he was a New York Yankee, which even made it more so because of the press. But Mickey was just—you pulled for him every time and you felt for him every time. And you admired him, you'd watch him run and glide and swing the bat and sometimes wince because of the pain. He was my hero. And when he passed away they had a thing out here in Palm Springs and I got up and spoke. I had people crying. I didn't have anything prepared except it came from inside talking about a man who gave so much. I know he wasn't perfect, if you measured him by the morals or the ethics of some people today, but, to me, he was Mickey Mantle. And he was what was my goal and gave me the impetus to want to become. Why do we take anything more than that away? He was to me the greatest.

JE: In '68, then, as he was finishing, this was a big time for you in 1968 because you won the National League Rookie of the Year Award. You batted 275, 15 homeruns, 82 RBIs, making it the first time the award had been won by a catcher. Also winning the '68 National League Gold Glove Award for Catchers, which was the first for a rookie and made the All-Star Team as well in '68. Did he ever compliment you or say something to you, which perhaps would have been the epitome of your life at that time?

JB: He sent me congratulations.

Chapter 8**Willie Mays - 2:30**

Johnny Lee Bench: But the epitome of my life was sitting in that locker room in the Astrodome for the '68 All-Star game. And I'm sitting at my locker, I was picked as the third catcher by Red Schoendienst, who's the manager. And I'm sitting there staying out of the way 'cause I'm just twenty years old, I mean, I'm just trying to stay out of everybody's way and not spike anybody. I mean, these guys are going by me, these are the future Hall of Famers and everything else. I'm sitting there at my locker and across from me in the locker room was Willie Mays. Willie looked at me and he got up and walked over and he pointed at me and said, "You should have been the starting catcher."

John Erling: Wow.

JB: And that was it, I didn't need anybody else. That was the most important time in my life, the most important thing anybody could have said. And then the next year in '69, I asked Roy Sievers, who had played with Ted Williams, if he would take me over and see if Ted would sign a baseball for me. I went over with him. Ted said, "Sure," and he signed the ball. I thanked him, I walked out of the locker room and looked at the ball and it said, "To Johnny Bench, a sure Hall of Famer, Ted Williams."

JE: Yeah, goose bumps for you, right?

JB: Ted Williams knows who I am. I remember when Sandy Koufax was doing the baseball games, and he walked in and said, "Hello, Johnny, I'm Sandy Koufax." And I said, "God." I mean, Sandy Koufax knows who I am. Ted Williams knows who I am. Willie Mays said, "You should have been the starting catcher." And by that time, things, publicity wise, were starting to come. And then it was Joe Willie Namath and myself who's the bachelors, traveling around the world with Bob Hope and being on all the talk shows. Not being afraid to sing a song no matter what people said. They knew I really couldn't sing but I knew the words. I never was afraid to do anything to promote or to make new things. I played on the Bob Hope Tournament for twenty-five years. I've had a great life.

JE: And bringing you back into that locker room, the '68 All-Star Game, Hank Aaron was in that locker room. Felipe Alou, Steve Carlton, Don Drysdale, Curt Flood, Bob Gibson, heady company. Don Kessinger, Jerry Koosman, Juan Marichal, Willie McCovey, Pete Rose, Ron Santo, Tom Seaver, Rusty Staub, Billy Williams, they're all there with you. That's pretty big stuff.

JB: It's pretty awesome, isn't it?

JE: Yeah it is.

JB: And I got to catch the last inning of the game.

JE: Who was pitching?

JB: Jerry Koosman. They said, “Put the kid in.” The coaches were saying, “You got to put the kid in.” Well, we didn’t have another catcher. Then they said, “Well, we don’t have any other catcher.” “Put the kid in! He’s not going to hurt himself.” So I got to catch the ninth inning of that ballgame.

Chapter 9

Pete Rose - 5:08

John Erling: Pete Rose is known as Charlie Hustle. How did he treat you, ‘cause he was there a couple years, I guess, before you were there? Did he treat you, a newcomer, in a special way? Or was he gracious to you?

Johnny Lee Bench: He put his arm around me and said, “Okay, kid, here’s what we’re going to do.” Basically. And we became friends, partners in business, oh yeah, he was driven. Pete wanted everybody, Pete needed everybody to play to win. He was born to win. He was born to play. He wanted to be the first single hitter to make \$100,000. He wanted to drive a Cadillac. Pete was fun, one of the funniest guys you’ll ever meet in your life. He’s got more things going on. His knowledge of sports and everything else. What players averages were, what they were doing, how they were doing in their fielding. Always kidding, always there, not afraid to—I used to hit slide all the time in Binger, Oklahoma, and I quit doing it because Pete did because they would have said, “You’re copying Pete.” Where I did that from Enos Slaughter. I wasn’t great at sliding anyway, but I’d like to go headfirst. Then I had to change it, I had to learn to slide.

JE: That spirit that he had, which earned him the name Charlie Hustle, was that infectious so that it just went to everybody?

JB: I’m sure it had to be, just the way everybody did. It wasn’t me, I played that way anyway, so—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: I wasn’t going to kill myself backing up first base running and jumping and doing everything else. Catchers had a little bit different role in what they were doing. But does anybody play harder than Pete? I did, but did I dive headfirst? No. I mean, it was my meal ticket. He got 200 hits, I could drive him in 100 times. He said, “You can hit 300.” I said, “I know I can hit 300, 300 is not a big deal.” I said, “I want to drive in the 100 runs, you get on base and do it.” Because they had sent me to Puerto Rico after the sixty-seventh season, I was such a dead pool hitter. They sent me to Puerto Rico to learn to hit to

right field up the middle. It was the most boring time in my life because I wanted to hit homeruns. That's why we played Homerun Derby. I went down to Puerto Rico and I was hitting like 337, third in the league, I think. I had two homeruns and it was just yuck. You didn't hit a lot of homeruns at Hiram Bithorn in the stadium there in San Juan. The week before the Christmas break we had a sponsor that was a jeweler. And he said, "Okay, for every homerun you hit you get a watch." So I said, "The heck with right field." And I hit five homeruns in the next six games. Took watches home to my two sisters-in-law, my mom, and my sister, and I kept one. And then I went back to Puerto Rico and started hitting to right field. Never did take though.

JE: Yeah.

JB: But I could have hit 300. I wound up hitting 300 in 1981, after I had sort of stopped catching. I could hit 300 but I'd rather hit for power. So many times foul balls and injuries and everything else that people don't realize that catchers go through, a ball in your right hand, a ball on your shoulder, you know, the reaction time, legs, all the things, the wear and tear that happens, it's what it is. Sometimes you can be deceived by average.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: It's like football, you can be deceived by the number of completions. So it's just what it is.

JE: About Pete Rose and his ineligibility and whether he should be reinstated, it was in August of '89 that Pete retired. He agreed to permanent ineligibility from baseball, he gambled on baseball, and the issue of his reinstatement and election to the Hall of Fame remains, really, a contentious one throughout baseball. How did you stand on all that?

JB: People buried me because I came out and said, "No he doesn't deserve to be in the Hall of Fame." And does he deserve it because for the on-field activities? Everybody knows he's got 4,000 hits or more. But it's the one rule that you don't break. And I made that comment, I said, "No." And, boy, I mean, Cincinnati, that's their boy, he grew up in Cincinnati, he was a Cincinnati native. People moved me, I'd go places and then I'd have to throw out the first buck and I was booed. That was their boy and he hadn't admitted to betting on baseball at that time. The real question is when people ask me at an event, back in the day, "Shouldn't Pete Rose be in the Hall of Fame?" I'd say, "What do you think?" They'd say, "Yes." I'd say, "Okay, do you have kids?" "Yes." I said, "Well, go home and tell your kids there's no more rules." Doctors can lose their license, attorneys can get disbarred. Peter Jacobson from the PGA tour said, "It's not fair." I said, "Peter, do you know the rules of golf?" He said, "Sure." I said, "You know how to break the rules and get kicked off the tour?" He said, "I never thought about it like that." So I've been on committees to help Pete get back in. He hasn't done what he's supposed to do and so— About a year and a half ago Pete called me and said, "Can we talk?" We sat down, he said, "I want to apologize because I ruined your Hall of Fame year. Everybody wanted to

do an interview, 'Johnny, congratulations on being in the Hall of Fame. What about Pete?' "

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: And it didn't make a great year for me. Now time has passed long enough, but here's the question that's still coming up. And it comes up all the time. I don't know why people don't have an answer.

Chapter 10

1975 World Series - 4:40

John Erling: You were in four World Series, '70 and '72, but in 1975 World Series it's been ranked by ESPN as the second greatest World Series ever played. And Cincinnati won the Series four games to three against the Boston Red Sox.

Johnny Lee Bench: Yeah, but what do they really know? It was the best. Saved baseball, brought baseball back after the strikes and all the other things that were going on. So, number two, I can't imagine what number one is, hope it's not the Cardinals and Rangers or something. 'Cause nothing could be better than what we had. And everybody to this day knows all about it.

JE: The sixth game of the Series was a twelve-inning classic. Do you have memories of that particular game, that sixth game?

JB: Bernie Carbo, of course, was my old roommate. He was the number one draft choice of the Reds in '65. I was number two, we were roommates. Six to 3 was the score when Bernie came up. We threw a slider in on his hands and I have no idea how he even fouled it off. Then he would pitch out over the plate the hits for the 3-run homer. They had the bases loaded in the ninth inning and we bring in Will MacAnanny. Nobody out, bases are loaded, I give Will the sign for the slider and he throws me a fastball. I don't know that I would have caught it but Fred Lynn swung at it, popped it up down the left field line. George Foster catches it, Denny Doyle tags up, Don Zimmer is yelling, "No, no, no!" He thought he said, "Go, go, go!" But it wasn't a deep fly ball. George steps out and throws one hopper to me, I tagged Doyle out, we've got double play. And I grabbed a hold of Will and said, "Will, you crossed me up. I gave you the sign for the slider." He said, "Well, sometimes those things work out." And he walked back to the mound. We got out of the inning and then, to me, the greatest catch ever in World Series was Dwight Evans when Joe Morgan hit a ball deep to right field. I don't say that Daryl caught the ball, the ball caught him.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: He turned around and threw it and they had a double play. Then we went to the twelfth inning, Pat Darcy had pitched the 11th and had done well. He warmed up in the twelfth and there was nothing. I looked over to Sparky in the dugout and I said, "No change that we're getting out of this inning."

JE: Yeah.

JB: And then Carlton Fisk hits a homerun and we have to play a seventh game. Here we were, looking at becoming the Buffalo Bills or the Denver Broncos that couldn't win a Series after being in two already and losing. Of course, Tony Perez hit the home run, Joe Morgan got the base hit. That was what baseball was all about.

JE: Yeah.

JB: You could win individual awards. When I walked into that locker room after that seventh game, twenty-five players were World Champions. Coaches, managers, trainers, equipment guys, sponsors, owners, and millions of people all over the country that loved the Big Red Machine, there was nothing greater than celebrating, everybody was equal, a World Champion. You have the parades and people are thrilled. I still tell people, "The effect it is on fans, when the Red Sox finally won a World Series there was a family in California that went outside and poured champagne over each other." So we do a lot for a lot of people's lives.

JE: That's one thing that's great about the sport of baseball, while it is a team it still does come down to that individual. Because every one of you have to stand up there at that plate all by yourself.

JB: Well, it's like life, there is no I in team but it's all I's. Whatever businesses you're in you'd better have the best people at each position. Oh you'll win as a team, but they don't say, "Okay, we'll take this team over here for the All-Star Game." No, they take the best players at each position. So if you're a car dealer you'd better have the best general manager, parts manager, sales manager, salesmen, a great product, and you really have a great team. But it's all made of great individuals.

JE: In '75, for that World Series, are your parents then able to be watching you?

JB: Oh they moved from Oklahoma to Cincinnati.

JE: So then they were with you?

JB: Oh yes, yeah.

JE: And to watch you?

JB: Oh yeah.

JE: And your dad—

JB: They moved up and they ran a motel up there. Gosh, people would come for the weekends and they'd spend the weekend and Mom would cook because the office was

their house, basically, where they slept and where they cooked. They had a living room and there was always people sitting out on the porch there. Just baseball fans, and Mom and Dad loved it. They would come to the games all the time. My dad was just a good old boy country boy, loved it, knew the game and every time I swung the bat, he swung the bat. I was still playing for Dad.

Chapter 11

Sparky Anderson - 4:12

John Erling: The Big Red Machine, as I understand it, Bob Hunter, a Los Angeles sports writer, first call you the Big Red Machine.

Johnny Lee Bench: I don't know. A few people has been credited to announcers, "They're playing like a machine. A well oiled machine and a Red machine, a Big Red Machine." Some people have taken credit. Of course, Bob was one of the great writers of our time, and Jim Murray and Milt Richmond in New York, and Furman Bisher. These guys, you loved to see them 'cause they were fair, they were smart, they were great writers. However the Big Red Machine was, it was moving, it was great, and, of course, led by one of the greatest people in my life, Sparky.

JE: And about Sparky, I understand he saw Pete Rose one day fielding grounders at third base. And something clicked with him, "If I put Pete there," then everything else began to fall into place with you and Tony Perez, Lee May, and Bobby Tolan. And he built on that.

JB: Well, he was in left field when George Foster, we traded for George Foster, and he said, "Pete, I want you to take some ground balls at third base. I want you to move to third base because I want to put George in left field." He said, "Well, when are you going to do that?" He said, "Tomorrow." So here's Pete, moving to the All-Stars in five different positions. Nothing fazed him, nothing, I mean, you wanted him to do it, hell, he'd bust his butt doing it. I mean, it was just the way it is. I played every position but short, second, and pitched. Sparky gave a chance to play in the outfield, which was always a liability. He gave me a day off catching but I was still out playing in the field. But if you ask Pete, "Can you catch?" he would have caught. It didn't matter to him, all he cared about was playing baseball. He loved it.

JE: Sparky Anderson, some comments about him. He was born in Bridgewater, South Dakota. Moved on to Los Angeles when he was eight years old. He became a big figure in your life?

JB: First day of spring training, I had met him instructionally, I guess I was about eighteen and he said, “Young man, come here.” I said, “Yes sir.” He said, “Let me see that glove.” He said, “Wow, you’re doing a great job.” So then we talked in the winter, but the first day he came as manager, I came out of the locker room first day in spring training, Sparky stopped me. He said, “Can I ask you a question?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “What would you think if we took infield over there, we took extra battings on this field, and we took pitchers’ practice on that field, and we did this on that field?” And it was like I had a warmth just go up my body. And I was like, “He thinks I have a brain.” And for the first time I really felt like a professional. Because all the time you’re dictated to by manager, by rules, or by organizations. Didn’t matter to me because a manager shouldn’t make a lot of difference. A manager can make decisions, but it’s your job to go on the field every day and manage yourself. But he asked me that and he asked me throughout my entire career with him, he would talk to me about situations and people. He would call Pete, Joe, and Tony, and myself and ask about a player. “What do you think if we traded for this guy?” We’d say, “No,” or we’d say, “Yes.” Because we were as good of talent judges as anybody. We talked about his family. He called me in privately and talked about, you know, his sons and some of the things that was going on. And then, when he got on the field, you know a great manager, he got the respect because he made decisions he already knew two or three innings ahead. And when it came time to pull the trigger and do something—and he allowed me total freedom in changing pitchers. I’d look over at the dugout and he’d go get somebody warmed up. I’d walk in the dugout after an inning, I said, “He’s all right, I think, for maybe one more, but I’d be very careful.” Or I’d walk in and say, “He’s done, get somebody in.” He never really questioned, he never questioned I don’t think one time ever my decisions. Because I was there, I knew what he had, I knew how he was throwing, I knew his sharpness. He was just a man that you learned to respect as a friend, as a manager, as a mentor, and, you know, I just loved the guy.

Chapter 12

Would Bench Manage - 2:20

John Erling: Did that association with him cause you to think that one day you wanted to be a manager?

Johnny Lee Bench: I was managing every day, so I really wanted to broadcast, I wanted to travel, I wanted to play golf, so a little bit selfishly, no. Was I willing to give that up? Not

for eight months, twenty-four/seven almost. I said, "If I managed it'd be like they basically do, go to the ballpark at four, four thirty. You have batting practice in infield and you can call in the lineup, these guys are playing today." Now today, the players go to the park at noon. They've got restaurants in their clubhouse, they eat, they watch all their TV. And there's nothing wrong with it, they work out, they do all the things they do and they get away from the stress of being around people or demands or whatever. And I think general managers are doing a lot of the managing. I don't know why there's not more. I know Gary Carter wanted to manage. I know Mike Schmidt wanted to manage. They never got a chance. It was great to see Mike Matheny come in without any real managerial experience and take the Cardinals to the play-offs. I thought that was great. Yes, I think you've got to pay your dues. There's some people in the minor leagues who deserve a chance to coach and to manage. But being on that field and knowing situations every day—Brian Sandberg's been managing and managing and managing. He's called up now as the third base coach and will probably take over on the Phillies. I think that's great. But for me, the only time I ever wanted to manage was when I was divorced from my oldest son Bobby's mother, I wouldn't get to see him enough and I was thinking, "How could I do this?" And I said, "Maybe I will manage, maybe I could manage and he would be able to come to the park. And he'd grow as a ballplayer, maybe." That's about the only time. Would I love to manage? Absolutely. Could I stand the rigors of twenty-four/seven? You know, you're the smartest guy in the world, and I'd put on that managerial uniform and I'd be the dumbest SOB that ever walked the face of the earth. Bobby Knight once said, "A critic is a legless man who teaches running. The press and the radio talk shows, the assassinations that go on every day on the air, talking about players and what they're doing, their extracurricular activities. People asked me, "What's wrong with the game?" I said, "Nothing. Turn off the radio. Don't read, just go to the game and enjoy."

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: Just enjoy the game of baseball, it's still beautiful.

Chapter 13

1976 World Series - 3:00

John Erling: Then I want to take you to the '76 World Series because then this becomes a back-to-back World Series, the only time it happened for the Cincinnati Reds. This was a head-to-head match-up with the New York Yankees and catcher Thurman Munson.

We can point out immediately, Munson bat in 529, you bat in 533. You were awarded the World Series Most Valuable Player Award and the Reds swept the Yankees in four games. Did you feel this between you and Munson that this was a big deal between the catchers?

Johnny Lee Bench: No. Thurman was one of the great, great, great guys. The first time we met him it was just like, he said, "Man, you're doing such a great job and you are this and you are that and don't you just love it? And everything else?" I mean, it was immediate, it was immediate friendship and it was immediate respect. We were totally two different types of players but we were totally two catchers so we had a bond. Almost all catchers have a bond. They respect each other for what they're doing, what they're having to go through on a day-to-day basis. Thurman just kept hitting and hitting and hitting. And I got to hop down the play-offs and World Series. I wasn't using my hands and getting started enough and I created a way of pointing the bat and bringing it back. I got a rhythm and timing and it was just a great World Series. To get back-to-back World Series was just wow. It just amplified the Big Red Machine. And then, of course, free agency comes along and it changes.

JE: In that series, you hit your first homerun in a World Series to give the Reds a 3 to 1 lead that they never relinquished in that game. And then you later added to that with a three-run shot in the 9th. And then that earned you the Series Most Valuable Player Award. So that's pretty heavy stuff in '76. You're twenty-eight years old. You're having fun, aren't you?

JB: Well, it's what you play for. Ted Marchibroda asked me one time on a plane, he said, "Why are you guys so successful?" I said, "We have black leadership, we have white leadership, and we have Spanish leadership and we don't know what color each other are." There was not an issue. We led the way and people had to follow. What we did everybody else had to do. And that's the example of a successful person. A leader is a person that is on time. A leader is a person that does his job. Everything you do. And we had Tony and Joe and myself and Pete and we had the other players, they were just as focused as we were and nobody was going to change that. We made a couple of bad trades for people, hmp, I say people, not necessarily players. It was designed for their ability to trade them but they didn't make it, they didn't make it in our clubhouse, they didn't fit. They were a little bit disruptive by their antics or whatever and they would be gone, because it wasn't allowed. We played the game every day. You get in the seventh inning, we might be behind, these guys, they were in trouble. I think we came behind like sixty-seven times. You just couldn't beat us, we were just too good.

Chapter 14**Baseball Work Ethic - 2:05**

John Erling: Did you see players with so much talent you just knew how good they were, but they never became the stars they could have because they didn't have that work ethic?

Johnny Lee Bench: I was Runner-Up Player of the Year in Oklahoma in baseball. And I think there was a kid named Farmer, man, gosh, everything about him just oozed. Good looks, six four, wore his head cocked back on his head, just graceful, could do everything and he never made it. Guys just sometimes, for whatever reason, just don't have the wherewithal or the confidence. They fail. I talked about in 1966, the fear of failure. And it wasn't failing myself, it was failing all those people in Coweta County that believed in me. And some people can't handle failure, they can't handle negativity. It's like Mickey Mantle when his dad said, "Okay, come on back home." Somebody's got to kick you in the butt.

JE: Um- hmm (affirmative).

JB: Some people need that. Other people are driven enough to be successful, to understand that we'll get them tomorrow. We lost the game, let's go have a cheeseburger. Some people never see that.

JE: That could be the name of a book for you, Let's Go Have a Cheeseburger.

JB: Well, I've got a book called Catch Every Ball: How to Handle Life's Pitches.

JE: Yep.

JB: In life, people come to me and say, "My child wants to be a catcher. What do I tell them?" I said, "Catch every ball." I talk about the vowels of success, the a, e, i, o, u's of life and the book, Catch Every Ball, talks about the fact that it's not just baseball, it's everything in life. You got a producer in the studio that if you throw something at him, and he can catch it and do, he's probably going to have a regular job. He's probably going to keep moving up. If they come to you with statistics you're way ahead of everybody. If you have an answer, people will trust you, people will believe in you, people will support you. So catch everything that's thrown your way. Learn about your business, learn the intricacies about how to do it. And you will be a great catcher. And you will catch everything thrown at you.

Chapter 15**Today's Game - 2:54**

John Erling: You were remembered, of course, for your great hitting. But behind the plate, a lot of people don't realize this, you were the first catcher to use a protective helmet in the field.

Johnny Lee Bench: I had a bad temper, '66, I wasn't supposed to make out, especially when the guys threw a pitch I was supposed to hit. We had a concrete floor and I'd throw the helmet down and I'd break it and it cost thirty-five dollars to replace it. So here I am, having to spend thirty-five dollars. I kept getting these foul tips on the top of my hat because they wanted you to bend low. So they kept bouncing these things right off the top of my head. And then I'd throw and the elastic had been stretched out. You'd throw and that little bar on the side would hit you and cut your nose. One day I saw Shem Lawlor, he had had a concussion, he had to wear a helmet. And I'm thinking, "Man, I turn this helmet around I won't throw it anymore." I put the helmet on, I put the mask on, and the mask didn't move. Now when a foul ball hit me in the mask it didn't jar as much. When I threw to second base it didn't go sideways. I said, "Man, this is it, this is the way to do it." Of course, it became standard now for everybody.

JE: You popularized catching one-handed. Sometimes we think everybody did that but you started that.

JB: Well, I broke my thumb twice. I said, "Man, this isn't working. I got to get this thumb stuck somewhere else." And I think Randy Huntley was doing some one-handed catching and Elston Howard had used this glove. So I grabbed this glove. I had fifteen passed balls my first year. And I didn't have any the second year because I learned to catch every ball. My way, the best way, the only way. People squat differently. People think they got to get into a catcher's stance one way. No, you got to squat down like you can naturally so your body's natural. So you have balance, then you learn to catch everything that's thrown at you. Then I took padding out of the glove so I could be softer so I could do sweep tags. I'd keep my right hand down to my side, I didn't break my thumb again, didn't break another finger on my throwing hand.

JE: Do you think that today's game itself is different from when you were playing?

JB: No. It's just money that causes agents and people and attitudes. They don't need the press, they don't have to work with the press. And the press really doesn't really care about working with them. They'd love to get a story, but a headline of some fashion will get them the credit, they'll write the story, and people will send it all over the country. You know, it's not about, "Great game, 2 for 4 today, he's had two assists, he did this." No, that's not what you read. People want to know everybody else's business. They want their

life to feel like they've got something going on in their life that will keep them involved and interested. And so the negativity of it all sometimes is beyond me. But you still appreciate those guys like Vince Scully who still does broadcasting, and Milo Hamilton and those people that have been great throughout the years.

Chapter 16

Bench Night - 3:05

John Erling: There's so many areas we can go into your career, but let's bring you to September 17, 1983, which is Bench Night in Cincinnati. Over 53,000 fans are packed into Cincinnati's Riverfront Stadium. The game is between Houston and the Reds. This is to be your final game.

Johnny Lee Bench: I made a decision in June, sitting in the hotel watching another rerun of I Love Lucy or something. We'd been to a movie, my buddy Tommy Hymn and I. I came out of the movie and said, "Tommy, I'm going to retire." "Naw." I said, "Yeah, yeah. The future of this team is not there. We won't win for the next couple of years. Free agency has drained us." I said, "I want to retire." So I went to tell the general manager, Nick Wagoner, I said, "Nick, I'm going to retire." He said, "Would you want to go to St. Louis?" Whitey Herzog wanted me to place first base. I said, "No." So September the 17th was the night they chose. We were having a bad year and you don't know, I mean, I was kind of interested what's going to be the attendance. We were hoping we'd get thirty-five, it could be forty. Well, it was the largest crowd ever on a daytime game, weekday game. To walk out and to be honored, your career you play for all of them. And it was now my night. I looked around and people are on their feet and it's, I mean, it's just magical, it really is. I guess, well, I did have a good career. I was presented some gifts and things and I said, "I'm going to try like hell to play good for you tonight." I got back behind the plate. You know, gosh, I mean, I broke seventeen bones. I was creaky out at bat on my nerve, my back was bad, it was time. It was time to change. That's what you have to understand is if you make your decision to retire or quit then you can live with the decision. Some people get released and everything else and they spend years and years trying to prove to everybody that they still can do it. But I couldn't be Johnny Bench anymore, which was not good enough for me. I was on a huge contract, nine hundred thousand a year for another two years, and I walked away from it. I wasn't earning the money, first of all. And I couldn't play, play Johnny Bench anymore. Um, but that night I hit homerun, my final

homerun of my career, 389. They gave me Joe Nuxhall's call of the play and he had tears in his eyes.

JE: Hmm.

JB: And he was crying. There were 53,000 people that were on their feet. I gave them something, they gave me something, and it was a great night.

JE: In that game you actually walked in the first inning. I know everybody in the stands were waiting for you to hit that homerun.

JB: Yeah, the pitcher got a few boos on that.

JE: But then you came to bat in the third inning and the Reds were trailing 2 to nothing. And then that's when you—was anybody on base?

JB: Yes, I think there were. I think there was one or two guys, actually, because I remember Paul Householder and Nick Esasky, I think, were on. They were at home plate. I can still recall coming around to them and the flashback here, really, I just got a flashback. Pretty cool, pretty cool.

JE: It is pretty cool.

Chapter 17

Hall of Fame - 5:23

John Erling: In Cincinnati, new street signs are in place on Johnny Bench Way? To be so honored in Cincinnati and then come home, and while you didn't play for Oklahoma, but you have this same kind of adulation in Oklahoma, and it's got to feel pretty good for you?

Johnny Lee Bench: Except that time that kid in second grade said, "I want to be a major league baseball player." I guess he fulfilled that pretty well and got a statue in Cincinnati now and I have that big statue outside the ballpark on Johnny Bench Way there in Oklahoma City, which I'm so proud of. I mean, I really am proud to be back. There's nothing like going back, driving down to Binger and sitting at Crainco. People come in there all the time anyway, you don't even have to go anywhere to meet anybody. They just come for coffee or gas or whatever they're doing. We have a reunion every now and then, I get to see some of the old classmates. It's fun to remember. I know there's not much else, I mean, I'm in thirteen Hall of Fames, I don't know if that counts for anything but—

JE: Well, you were elected to the Hall of Fame on the first ballot in 1989, the third highest voting percentage ever behind only Ty Cobb and Hank Aaron. How does that feel?

JB: It's the greatest. I tell everybody I really didn't go in, my dad did. He was there with me and Mom and it was just, gosh, for him it was everything. I haven't been around a lot of the Hall of Famers, I was welcomed. You know, you walk among the greats, greater than you are, all of them, and then see Dad walking around the lobby and just the pride he had. So Ted and Johnny were going into the Hall of Fame. His name is not on the plaque but it should be.

JE: Your dad, he passed on in what year?

JB: 1991.

JE: And your mother?

JB: It's been seven years, I believe, now. They were wonderful people, gosh. It's inevitable, the fatalist that goes from the bus wreck to the end of time, you know, it's going to happen. It's not fair sometimes. But I told a guy one day, "Sorry about your wife passing." He said, "Don't be." He said, "Do you realize how lucky I was to have that woman in my life for all of fifty years?" That's what life is. It's the quality of life that you have. It's the people that make such a difference in your life. You know, you can't extend always the things you want, the warranty runs out on all of us. And I was just so lucky to have those people in my life. How can you have a better set of parents and be so lucky to do what I've accomplished in my life. I've made them proud, they were unbelievable, and the warranty just ran out.

JE: Yeah. You were a broadcaster for the Reds from 1987 to 1990 and you've been very, very supportive of Oklahoma. On the Seniors Golf Tournament, which you have exceeded, during our state's Centennial, the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade you spoke to the audience. And in that year, the Rose Bowl party and on a float in Pasadena. I was there, I saw that. Got word that someone couldn't make it so you held up a sign that said, "Bobby Murcer."

JB: Yep.

JE: And then the parade in Oklahoma City, you and Miss America's. And then your statue outside the ballpark. You have given a lot to this state and given of your time. Speaking for all Oklahomans, we're proud of you and everything that you've given to our state.

JB: I've been lucky and I'll always be an Okie. I still talk to Toby Keith quite a bit. I'm so proud of the music that we've produced, from Milne to Mitchell all the way down to Garth and to Blake Sheldon and Toby Keith and Reba and Vince. My gosh, Oklahoma makes you proud, doesn't it?

JE: Yeah.

JB: I mean, every time you think about it its names are unbelievable in the industry. But then there's Dean Crane, there's Ronnie Crane, there's Carol Scott, people from Oklahoma

that, damn, they're good. I mean, they're just such good people. Why can't you be proud?

JE: Yeah.

JB: It's a great state. We set a standard for a lot of people business wise and oil wise and rodeo. Tim Shoulders, yeah, I'm proud of all of them and I'll always be proud to be from Oklahoma.

JE: Here is something that just happened Tuesday of this past week where Marvin Miller dies. He was ninety-five, an economist, a labor leader. He changed baseball and ultimately all professional sports. Might have affected even your pay yourself. Did you have a comment about Marvin Miller and how he was able to change contract time?

JB: Yeah, there was the good and the bad. You hated the strikes, I hated them, fans hated them. Marvin's sole interest was to better our lives, to equalize the money. Money was being made by the owners, players should have a part of it. They should earn more and should be compensated. Marvin did that in a great manner. He fell one short vote shy of being elected to the Hall of Fame by the Expansion Committee. Part of it was from the votes that management voted. Ninety-five is a great life. I talked to him, the 1st of October I talked to him when he was in hospice. Had a chance to say, "Hi," and to thank him for what he did for baseball. Yeah, he's a great figure and I'm sure that that may change some day that he may be in the Hall of Fame.

Chapter 18

How to Be Remembered - 2:22

John Erling: Advice to the young people who will be listening to this for generations to come, of any profession, and obviously for those that are interested in playing baseball, what do you say to them?

Johnny Lee Bench: Work hard, watch the great players, emulate them, be yourself, catch every ball.

JE: Hmm. How would you like to be remembered?

JB: You know, as a really honest, good, hardworking player, gave every bit of it every day. A great father. Three boys, twenty-two, six, and three. Still working on my six- and three-year-olds because I'll still be here for a long time for that, hopefully. And to know that I represented myself to the family and to the people of Oklahoma in the manner that one

should. I accomplished a lot. If I wanted to sit back and say, "I did this, I did that," no-no, I've only got a couple of statues or pictures up here. I've been going through stuff that I've collected. I'm going to put it out in Oklahoma, let other people see it if they like to. The museum is good already, the MVP trophies, the Rookie of the Year Awards, bats, gloves, gold gloves. I think I made a lot of people proud. And if they don't like me, hey, that's okay too. There's always something going on so I never worry about that. Just keep the positives in your life, just do the right thing.

JE: And it's rare for a player to play for the same team, these days, as many years as you did on top of all that sterling career.

JB: Yeah I'm sure that everybody, even you, probably had a chance to change jobs. You were a free agent. Sometimes you have to take the best thing that comes to you. And sometimes they don't want you around anymore, they've got another catcher coming up. They've got a better catcher. They've got a better second baseman and they've got to make room for him. So it's a business, it is. They're in a business, you have to be in a business. And it would be great if it happened, but you're going to have a really Hall of Fame career to make that work.

JE: Well, Johnny, I want to thank you for this time. You were very giving to the interview and I enjoyed it very much.

JB: I did too. Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure. You're a man of more knowledge and maybe I should have you write all that stuff down so I'll remember it.

Chapter 18

Conclusion - 0:33

Announcer: (music) This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time on VoicesofOklahoma.com.