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Bench entertains, inspires at Keith-Albee

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Cincinnati Reds legend and Baseball Hall of Fame member Johnny Bench speaks as the Marshall Artists Series presents “A Evening with Johnny Bench” on Thursday, Oct. 24, 2019, at the Keith Albee Performing Arts Center in Huntington.

Sholten Singer/The Herald-Dispatch

HUNTINGTON — Johnny Bench could catch, hit, throw and can tell a joke.



The Cincinnati Reds great had a crowd larger than his hometown of Binger, Oklahoma, (population 661) laughing throughout Thursday evening at the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center during "An Evening with Johnny Bench. The Vowels of Success," part of the Marshall Artists Series.

The Hall of Fame catcher regaled the crowd with stories of playing with the Big Red Machine, growing up in a small town, playing minor league baseball and more. He also touched those in attendance when he pledged \$5,000 to "The Herd Rises" campaign to build Marshall University a new baseball stadium.



WSAZ sports director Keith Morehouse, left, talks with former Marshall and Major League Baseball player Jeff Montgomery as the Marshall Artists Series presents "An Evening with Johnny Bench" on Thursday, Oct. 24, 2019, at the Keith Albee Performing Arts Center in Huntington.

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Bench will not attend Saturday's ground-breaking ceremony for the stadium as previously reported, but said he is thrilled the Thundering Herd and legendary former coach Jack Cook will see ground broken at 10:30 a.m. Saturday at 10th Avenue and 24th Street.

Wearing a Kelly green jacket, Bench offered his wisdom, such as, "the next- best thing to winning is losing because that's where you learn" and "use people. Use people for their knowledge, knowledge that you don't have."

Bench explained that using people is not meant in a derogatory manner, but to build success. He explained that he was an all-star catcher, but needed a second baseman because he couldn't play second base.

"There's no I in team, we've all heard that," Bench said. "It's all Is, folks. An orthopedic surgeon is going to have other people in there with him and he wants the best people. If you have a car dealership, you want the best sales people, the best mechanics, the best people you can have because then you're a genius."



Regarded by many as the greatest catcher of all time, Bench drew great laughter when he told of returning to his hometown in 1970 for a parade to honor him for winning the National League most valuable player award.

"We reached downtown and nobody was there," Bench said. "Everybody was in the parade. Finally, three drunk guys came out of a bar and said 'hey Johnny!' We did a U-turn and waved to each other as we went back through town."

Bench sang several songs during the more-than-hour-long performance, favoring tunes by comedian Ray Stevens, to the delight of the crowd. He also participated in a question-and-answer session afterward. One fan asked who the best player he played with was.

"The best guy was Tony Perez," Bench said of the Reds' Hall of Fame first baseman. "As a player, as a person, he was our glue. Joe Morgan might have been the best player ever. Pete (Rose) was great."

Bench said he and Pete often traded barbs.

"Pete told me I should hit .300," Bench said. "I told him you just get on base and I'll drive you in 100 times."

The crowd laughed, as it did much of the evening, such as when Bench described his eighth-grade self.

"I was 5-foot-2," Bench said. "I had hands as big as I have now. I had feet, size 12, as big as I have now. My head was as big as it is now. The only people recruiting me were Barnum & Bailey."

Bench also told humorous stories about St. Louis Cardinals Bob Gibson and Lou Brock, as well as former Reds manager Dave Bristol. He also poked some fun at the Pittsburgh pirates, Boston Red Sox and new York Yankees.

Bench played from 1967 through 1983 and hit 389 home runs, drove in 1,376 and batted .267. A 114-time all-star, Bench won 10 Gold Glove awards.

Bench reminded those in attendance to value themselves.



"You are important," Bench said. "We can't hold our happiness in the hands of others, so let's feel good about ourselves. There's not always going to be somebody there clapping and saying "great job.' Set goals, whatever they are, and reach them, then feel good about it."



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