

Sports



(Photo by Dan Mancuso, Illinois Valley News)

Illinois Valley resident Bob Johnson displays his World Series ring and uniform from his days as a pitcher for Pittsburgh, Thursday, March 6.

Johnson won it all and gave back

By
Jenna Larkin
IVN Contributing Writer

When asked what it feels like to win a World Series, Bob Johnson replied, “It’s almost like your first year in Little League and you get your first uniform.”

At a young age, Johnson formed many friendships through baseball. He and a few friends taught themselves how to play America’s favorite pastime. During summer days in Illinois, Johnson and eight other young guys could be found playing baseball from sunrise to sunset in what they called “The Bowl.”

With eight boys by his side, Johnson and his friends would divide up into teams in the morning and play into the afternoon, only stopping to eat lunch. Then, they would choose new teams and play until just before dark, trying to beat the clock in order to be home before dark to avoid getting into trouble. Every so often, a dad would show his son a new technique and then it would be passed on to the rest of the guys. If it worked, the technique was often used. If not, it would be tossed out and the learning continued. This continued for most of Johnson’s youth. When he was 10 years old, Little League had formed in his town and that was the first time the boys were able to play baseball through an organization. The group of nine boys went on to play all through high school, some of them going onto college.

After college, Johnson got his first break in the semi-pro league for a team called Rogue County Athletics. With the age limit being from high school age to 19 years old, Johnson found himself a few years older than most of the other league members. That didn’t stop Johnson from shinning at the semi-pro level. The Rogue County Athletics won the state tournament in Illinois and went on to Wichita, Kan. They went up against 32 other teams and played against some guys that would ultimately become Johnson’s teammates or opponents in the minor leagues.

While in the semi-pro league, Johnson was being scouted by the New York Mets. After his stint with the Rogue County Athletics, Johnson signed with the Mets in 1963 as a free agent and played most of his minor career with the Mets.

In 1964, Johnson went to the Mets spring training camp in St. Petersburg. With 50 other pitchers all trying out, Johnson felt the pressure. He was able to overcome the pressure and made the team as a pitcher. Johnson was the opening day pitcher that season for the Mets and almost pitched a no-hitter. With two outs in the ninth inning, the batter bunted and made it to first, taking the no-hitter from Johnson.

Bob Johnson’s baseball career almost came to an end in 1967 in a motorcycle accident when the bike fell on his left leg, which he almost lost. Because of the extensive damage, Johnson was not able to play that season. In 1968, he was called into the Army for a year, missing the entire season. By early 1969 Johnson had three doctors attending to his leg. Two of the three wanted to amputate his leg just above the knee to stop the infection that continued to worsen. With the help of the Met’s team doctor, Johnson’s leg was spared and he continued his baseball career.

Near the end of 1969, Johnson was back pitching with a wet cast on his left leg; enabling his muscles to work properly but hold the bones in place. At the end of 1969, Johnson tried his shot at the Triple A league. He soon found that having taken two seasons off, the Triple A league proved to be difficult. So Johnson was drafted to a Double A league team, only staying for two and a half months. In that time, though, he led the league in ERA with 13 complete games, five shut-outs and a record of 13-4.

In the off-season of that same year, Johnson was traded to the Kansas City Royals. In 1970, Johnson’s first year with the Royals, he struck out 206 batters and led the American League in strike outs for a right-handed pitcher, only to be surpassed by two left-handed pitchers. He was also runner up for Pitcher of the Year.

In the winter of 1970, Johnson was traded to the Pirates. Johnson went on to play three seasons with the Pirates, 1971, 1972 and 1973. In 1971, Johnson’s first year with the Pirates, they won the World Series. That also proved to be his best season, finishing 9-10 with a 3.45 ERA. He also started 27 times, had seven complete games and one shutout.

After the Pirates, Johnson went on to play for the Cleveland Indians and Atlanta Braves, where he faired just as well as with the Pirates.

During Johnson’s baseball career he accumulated a record of 28-34 with a 3.48 ERA. He also had 507 strikeouts in 183 appearances with 76 starts. Johnson completed 18 games with two shutouts, had 12 saves during 692 innings pitched. Johnson also garnered 15 hits in 157 at bats throughout his career.

After Johnson’s baseball career he continued to play ball in the winter in Mexico, Panama, Venezuela and the Dominican Republic. He also coached a few college teams as well.

After Bob had moved to the Rogue Valley in mid-2000’s he began umpiring high school baseball. His favorite areas to umpire games were in Prospect and here in the Valley. Eventually Johnson settled down in Cave Junction and began helping at IVHS, becoming the pitching coach. Ultimately Johnson was asked to become the head coach for the Cougar baseball team, coaching for three years. During Johnson’s years as a coach he broke down pitching into three main categories:

1) The mechanics, the physical throwing of the ball. Johnson taught his pitchers the way he learned, which ultimately

has not changed much over the years.

2) The theory of pitching. How do you want to set up your batters? How do you want to pitch to each batter to accomplish the end result of not having the batter hit the ball so hard it flies out of the park and not to have a ground-er going so fast that an infielder can’t field the ball? The ultimate goal for a pitcher is to take the sting off the ball, helping fielders if the batter manages to connect.

3) The emotion of pitching. To Johnson, this is the hardest to deal with. A pitcher has to be able to deal with the fact that they lost or gave up a home run and still have the ability to get back in the groove and continue to pitch to reach the ultimate goal of winning the game. This is where a coach comes into play. A coach should know his/her players and how to get that pitcher out of his own head and back into the game.

In 2013, Johnson stepped down as head coach for IVHS. Although Johnson has enjoyed his years in the big leagues and as a coach, he is enjoying his days helping here and there with Little League or other baseball organizations as well as giving speeches as a special guest.



(Photo by Dan Mancuso, Illinois Valley News)

Johnson’s 1971 World Series ring.

Arts Red
Garter
Where the
Valley comes
to play

Karaoke - Dancing
Live Music

Annwyn
& George
St Patrick's Day Show
Friday, March. 14
@ 5:30 p.m.

Taylor's
Country Store

Wild River
HANDCRAFTED FOOD & ALE
GUPPY
Sat., March 15
@ 6 p.m.
Every Friday
Jay Barley
Every Wed
Open Mic. Night
Wed's From
6-8 p.m.

Saturday
night Pool
Tourney
@
Sportsmans
Tavern

Kate's
Redwood
Bar and Grill

Tuesday to Sunday
Noon to Close
Happy Hour 3-5
Stop in and see
Kate and Mamie
Today!

St. Patrick's Day
Celebration Fund
Raiser
featuring: Sequoyah
Oregon, Rosie of Silas
Wolf, Stringbean
Stewgrass, Dawna
Crocker, Lonesome
Road and Only Natural.
\$10 show starts at 6 pm
March 15
@
Mc Grew's
Course