

Charlie Mechem:

Welcome to 15 Minutes With Charlie. I'm your host, Charlie Mechem. This was a series of podcasts that I've been doing in connection with my recently published book, Total Anecdotal, in which I sit down with guests to discuss anecdotes from the book. We're delighted to have another chance to visit with Baseball Hall of Famer, the greatest catcher in baseball history, Johnny Bench.

This episode is part two of our conversation. So if you haven't already heard part one, be sure and listen to it. Please enjoy part two of my conversation with Johnny Bench.

The importance of returning your phone calls and your emails. Nothing bothers me more than people who don't return phone calls or email, because it says one of two or three things, none of which are good. One, that they're not really much interested in whatever it is you're trying to communicate with them. And the other is that they must not have a high regard for you as you would like or they would return the communication. And I have seen a number of situations in my life, Johnny, where a failure to return a call or an email leads to some pretty serious negative consequences. So I put that in the [inaudible 00:01:39].

Johnny Bench:

You're talking the phone calls, I called someone the other day. I say, "Hello. Sorry I'm not here, I'm making some changes in my life and I'm going through some things and I want to make sure that I do the right things in my life. But I'm making some changes and so leave your number and your name. If I don't call you back, you're one of the changes."

Charlie Mechem:

That is good. That is really good.

Speaker :

That's a great one.

Johnny Bench:

Carry on.

Charlie Mechem:

That is wonderful. The next one is really important, I think, and that is the critical need to have a sense of humor. And some people have a sense of humor just built in, others have to work at it, but I can't tell you how many times in my life a tense or awkward situation has been either avoided or alleviated by a sense of humor. And it's also amazing how people really are, in intense situations, they're looking for something to break the ice. So having a sense of humor, ideally self-deprecating, never ever at the expense of somebody else, but having a sense of humor, I have found to be incredibly important.

And I guess the final one, Johnny, is civility. I'm convinced that as a nation and maybe as a world, we're losing basic civility, having respect for one another, respecting the views of others even if you don't agree with them. Respecting other religions, other political views, not necessarily espousing them or embracing them, but understanding them and being respectful of them. So that's kind of my list of consonants.

Johnny Bench:

Well, you made a very good point and I've always said that the best classroom is at the feet of elderly people.

Charlie Mechem:

Yeah, yeah.

Johnny Bench:

Not that you're elderly, or... Well, you are, Charlie. I'm sorry.

Charlie Mechem:

No, I am. I'm elderly plus.

Johnny Bench:

Yes. So here's my vowel and the A is "an attitude." You have your choice: you wake up with an attitude or someone may wake up next to you with an attitude, but it's up to you. When I walk around and people say, "How are you doing?" I say, "Fantastic." And they look strange at me. What's wrong? What's wrong with being that? What's wrong with having an attitude of happening to be good?

And you can change your attitude throughout the day. And you can change the attitude of other people by smiling at them, by telling them a joke or just being kind. He is an effort for excellence. Why don't you want to be the best? Why not the best? Why don't you make every effort to be the best whatever it is that you're trying to do? It follows your line of passion. Be involved, be passionate about it. But also, it's always striving to make yourself be the best and most excellent person you can be.

Opportunity is... Or I, there is no "I" in "team," but it's all eyes. Better have the best individual at each position. You're always wanting to hire smarter people than you. You're always wanting to have, when you pick an all-star team, you don't go out and say, "Let's just take that group of people over there." You take the best people at each position. So individually, it is up to you to have the responsibility to do your job the best you can.

Always an opportunity that comes dressed in overalls and looks like work. And if you've lost the opportunity, somebody else will find it. So you always take advantage of opportunities that come your way.

"U"? Using people. I love using people. I'm using you right out Charlie, because you have knowledge. You have power. I don't know how to do what you do with the computer. I don't always know how electricity works. I don't know that. So I use quality and the very best people.

When I wrote this book, people came up to me. Parents would come up and say, "My child wants to be a catcher. What do I tell them?" I said, "Catch every ball." And they look and I say, "Think about this. When I went out there and I caught everything that came my way, people said, 'Wow, what a great catcher.' And then I started thinking about professions, all professions. If I need an insurance agent and I called him and he has all the answers, I want to use him. If I go to a doctor and he catches everything I throw at him and he's got answers and he comes back to me and says, 'Here's what we're going to do.' If you have a lawyer... And so everything is catching every ball that happens, in all professions. It doesn't just happen by the plate."

Charlie Mechem:

Well, that's really good, Johnny. It really is good. I don't know whether young people, whatever age group that may be, think about the kind of things we've just been talking about. I hope they do. But even if they don't, having this kind of a conversation may stimulate them to do that because young people today are really smart. There's no issue with their intelligence. I think their focus needs some work sometimes because in today's world, as you know, there are a million different ways to go. You can go on the internet and find enough to keep you busy for the next 10 years, much less the next 10 minutes. So I think we have a challenge.

And by the way, in that regard, Johnny, I'd love to have your reaction to this. Whenever I speak to young people's groups, and just about a week ago, I gave a talk to a college golf team of female in California. We talked about women in golf and so on. And then I said, "Tell me something: who are your heroes?" And more often than not, when I asked that question, they look at me like, "What's he talking about?" And I always say, "No. I think it's important to have heroes. It's important to have somebody in your life when you're young that you admire and would like to be like." I wonder, Johnny, whether you agree with that and what's your take?

Johnny Bench:

A hundred percent, [Mickey Me-dal 00:08:20] was my idol. And if it'd been in today's world, Ray would have found everything out about [inaudible 00:08:26].

Charlie Mechem:

Yeah.

Johnny Bench:

And I had a lawyer by the name of Ruben [Katz 00:08:30]. I've had Dr. Louis Gonzales who operated on my lung. I have friends that go out and work hard every day, but my dad was my hero because he got up at five o'clock in the morning and he'd go drive that gas truck. And then he would get all that stuff done before then, then he would come and take me fishing or he would take me to the ballgame.

There's a lot of people that you wouldn't think are heroes, but the quality of their life really makes it the substance of what they are. So I always look for people, and I have so many great friends who are really admirable people and they can all be heroes in some sense.

Charlie Mechem:

Let me tell you what I think. I have never known a teenager, or for that matter, slightly younger than teenagers, to ever pay any attention to what their parents say. But what they do is they watch you and they see what you're doing and how you're doing it. So that if they see you're in this job and you're happy, that your wife and their mother is happy, that you're doing things that seem important to you and to other people, that's what's going to influence them. And happily, Mike laughed about that and said he agreed, and his three kids now have become extremely useful and helpful. So in any event, that's the...

Johnny Bench:

Do you have a vowel? Did you think about your vowels? [crosstalk 00:10:10]

Charlie Mechem:

Let me see. [crosstalk 00:10:10] The one I looked at, it was a consonant. Let me look here very quickly and see.

Johnny Bench:

I'd love that my audience write down their vowels. I'll be speaking and they'll say, "What about aspiration? What about, did you inspire before you expired?"

Charlie Mechem:

Yeah, well, here's one. This is A, "appearance and good matters." I think-

Johnny Bench:

Good.

Charlie Mechem:

... we're not as concerned as we ought to be with how we look and how we behave. And even in this age, when ties seem to be going out of style and casual dress seems to be in style, I still think appearance, good grooming and good manners are very important.

Johnny Bench:

Okay. "E" is...

Charlie Mechem:

Let me...

Johnny Bench:

"E" is for experience, for excellence. You know what? Another one of my "E" was employability, if you have to write out your resume, would you hire yourself?

Charlie Mechem:

Good question, good question. And the answer is, if I was as old as I am now? God no, I wouldn't.

Let's see. Now this one, here's an "A." I'm stretching it a little bit, but "avoid hubris." Avoid hubris. Being filled with yourself, being egotistical, which just a longer word to hubris is bad stuff, and eventually it will catch up with you. So that one I would say is very important.

Here's two more, John, that could be under "A." One is "control your anger." I think it's very important in life to control your anger, even when it's awfully hard to do, but anger rarely is productive and should be controlled. And another "A," and this is really, I think, important. Trying to think the best way to... "Agonize." In my book, I say, "It's okay to worry because worry can be productive and can lead to solutions, but never agonize to the point where you become impotent in terms of reaching a solution. People say, "Well, how do you know when you're agonizing as opposed to worrying?" And I say, "You'll know." When you keep going over the same thing over and over and over again.

Johnny Bench:

Insanity part comes up.

Charlie Mechem:

That's exactly right.

Johnny Bench:

I used to tell my mother, "Mom, don't waste your worry. Don't waste the worry. 90% of the stuff never happens and the other 10% we can handle."

Charlie Mechem:

Good. Very good point. Johnny, before we hang up, I want to go off script here a little bit and ask you, how do you think the Reds are going to do this year?

Johnny Bench:

I think the Reds are in pretty good shape this year. I love the offense and our pitching is going to surprise some people.

Charlie Mechem:

Good.

Johnny Bench:

We've just got to get a closer, or closer. We had a [inaudible 00:14:05] with the closing last year, and we're going to have one of these young kids or something step up or a kid that was that... Or one of our players that have had a couple of years of experience step in. I think you're going to see a really good ball club. And of course, I think a lot of it is contingent on how [Johnny Va-do 00:14:18] plays, and if [Johnny Va-do 00:14:21] comes back from a couple of years of all-tiers, I think we've got a real good chance of having a great year.

Charlie Mechem:

Johnny, how involved are you with the team?

Johnny Bench:

Oh, no, no. They're way too smart for me. They don't need my input. It's like, "Keep walking back into the boardroom." They act like they're listening to you, "But we're working on something else right now, Charlie. But thanks for coming by. We appreciate you being here [crosstalk 00:14:48] interested in what we're doing, but I think we've got the way we want it right now. So thanks Charlie. Great to see you again, you look great by. My gosh, I can't believe you're an octogenarian and it's just wonderful of you to do that. And I'll come to one of your ceremonies next time we have one."

Charlie Mechem:

I guess that's exactly right. The giveaway line is always, "You're looking great."

Johnny Bench:

Yeah, that's when you know you're getting old.

Charlie Mechem:

That's it. That's when you know.

Johnny Bench:

Yeah, "You look great."

Charlie Mechem:

Hey, I've got a great one that you can pull on one of your buddies sometime. A friend of mine, a few years ago, told me that when he turned 70, he was talking to one of his friends and the guy said, "You're 70 years old?" And he said, "Yeah, I am." "That's just amazing. I thought you were at least 80." That's so wonderful. Burst the bubble.

Johnny Bench:

Yeah, I think I told you when I turned 72 in December, I asked this lady friend, "Do I look 72?" And she said, "No, but you used to." If you're a Dodger, they've got beat both by the Astros at the Red Sox. And I wouldn't be surprised if we don't see more penalties coming down for a couple of other teams.

Charlie Mechem:

Yeah, yeah.

Johnny Bench:

They've been doing it. I think it's very difficult. It really is, if I'm the player on the other team, I think they're going to get [Sidney 00:16:20] to say, "We were stripped back and the strike here of 81, they made the season two halves and the Reds won the most total games for the season, but they didn't win the first half or the second half. And as a result, we never got into the playoffs.

So sometimes you feel like you've been cheated a little bit, or deprived more is a better word possibly, deprived of what opportunity you had. I think somebody said the other day that 73 curve balls that [Curshaw 00:16:56] threw, they hit. So that means, but certain pictures tip. And what I mean, "tip" is somewhere in their motion, they may flare off the glove, they may come up by the side of their body, they may have a different height on their glove when they fill the curve ball, it may be flared open. And sometimes you read them. I used to do it all the time. I mean, I would know that, but it's not like having somebody definitely know what the signs are. Now in the old days, what we would do is I would go to the pitcher, "I'm going to give you a curve ball sign and I want you to throw a fastball at his head." Boy, did I not trust the next guy who's [crosstalk 00:17:38] the garbage can.

Charlie Mechem:

Amen. Speaking of that, did you ever play? My years may be all screwed up, but did you ever play against Bob Gibson?

Johnny Bench:

Oh yeah.

Charlie Mechem:

Because I read a couple of chorus where he said that they hadn't changed the rules on where you can pitch, "I would have been the best ever."

Johnny Bench:

Well, Bob was, we used to watch... Real quick. I'll try to make this quick. My dad and I watched television on the Friday Game of the Week. And my dad was like all the other guys, like you too Charlie, you'd sit TV and you'd watch it. And some guy would swing and they'd say, "Oh, I could hit that. I could hit that. How could he [inaudible 00:18:17]?"

Well, I got called up to the Reds and [inaudible 00:18:20] and I believe my dad could do that. I really do. I thought he could hit anything. So I figured I'd call up to the Reds and then we didn't even make it through to St. Louis. I invited Mom and Dad up. I was going to get them a motel room, I got them tickets right behind the dugout and everything else. I'm going to have a great game, it's the first game and the first game we faced.

So I go out there and I strike out the first time and I strike out the second time. And I strike out the third time. And I was really trying, Charlie. I came back to the dugout. When I got to the on-deck circle, I started to smile. Well, Dave Bristol was the manager. He was kind of like Sergeant Carter on Gomer Pyle US Marine. You took everything serious on a game of baseball. And when I got to the dugout, he's leaning on the rail there as I stepped down into the dugout and he looked up and answered, "What in the hell is so funny?" And I said, "I was just thinking I don't think Dad can hit this guy."

Charlie Mechem:

Thank you for joining me for today's conversation. If you'd like to listen to more episodes, please visit charliemechem.com or search for 15 Minutes With Charlie in your podcasting app. And if you're enjoying the show, you should check out my book, Total Anecdotal, The Fun Guide to Help You Become a Better Speaker and Writer. Learn more at charliemechem.com/book. That's charliemechem.com/book. Or you could acquire the book either through Amazon or Barnes and Noble. Thank you.