

Barry Larkin profile

By Jeff Louderback

One humid afternoon this summer at his home in Orlando, Barry Larkin was lounging on a raft in the pool when he broke the silence with a gratifying laugh. His wife, Lisa, asked him what the amusement was all about.

“I told her that this is the first time in years I can remember spending a summer day doing absolutely nothing except relaxing,” Larkin said. “For so long, my springs, summers and falls have consisted of taking road trips, studying opposing pitchers, preparing for series after series, playing through injuries and experiencing the ups and downs a baseball season brings.

“I thought, ‘Now, here I am on a raft in my pool,’” he added. “It’s definitely a nice feeling.”

If any recently retired Major League Baseball player has earned a summer of comfort, it is Larkin. The 12-time All-Star played 2,180 games, collected 2,340 hits, slugged 198 home runs and recorded a .295 career batting average in 19 seasons – all with the Cincinnati Reds in the city where he was born and raised.

One of the best defensive shortstops of his era, Larkin won the Gold Glove Award from 1994-96, and likely would have earned more without the presence of Ozzie Smith. He received the Most Valuable Player award in 1995 when he led the Reds to the National League Central Division title and their most recent post-season appearance. He also batted .353 in his lone World Series, a four-game sweep of Oakland in 1990. Larkin became the first Major League shortstop to join the 30-30 club when he had 33 home runs and 36 stolen bases in 1996. At 40, he even hit .289 and played in one more All-Star Game in 2004, his final season.

Numbers that might earn him a spot in Cooperstown and the Baseball Hall of Fame aren’t all that Larkin brought to the Reds. His loyalty to Cincinnati, passion for the game and commitment to the fundamentals earned him respect from teammates and opposing players. Larkin was named team captain in 1997. The last player to wear the "C" for the Reds was Larkin's boyhood hero, Dave Concepcion, who wore it when he retired nearly a decade before.

Now, less than a year removed from his final All-Star appearance, Larkin’s time does not solely revolve around his swimming pool. The father of three is a special assistant to Washington Nationals general manager Jim Bowden, and president and CEO of Champions Sports Complex, a training facility that hosts amateur tournaments and provides instruction in baseball, softball, volleyball, basketball, football, cheerleading, soccer and lacrosse.

Champions has locations in Cincinnati, Lexington, Louisville and Indiana, but its crown jewel is the 92,000-square-foot facility in Orlando where standouts like Larkin, former NBA All-Star Dee Brown and one-time Cincinnati Bengals tight end Tony McGee provide skill development in their respective sports. The state-of-the-art center offers private and group instruction, competitive leagues and tournaments, and advanced sports performance training in a structure that houses an indoor baseball and softball field, automated batting cages, hitting areas, a wood floor gymnasium that is used for eight volleyball courts or four basketball courts, and a outdoor turf all-sport field designed for football, soccer and lacrosse. Other features include a performance training area for speed and agility enhancement and a sports rehabilitation center operated by Dr. Tim Kremchek, who serves as the Reds' team doctor.

As he gives a personal tour of the cavernous building, which on this day hosts a national high school girls basketball tournament in the gymnasium and an AAU team practice in the indoor baseball area, a group of players and their parents from Cincinnati approach Larkin and ask him for autographs and photographs. He kindly obliges, signing and posing until the last person leaves. It is young athletes like these that Larkin is trying to reach with Champions.

"We're a true instructional facility. In every sport, we stress the fundamentals, which are lacking in professional sports today," said Larkin, who was drafted by the Reds from the University of Michigan as the fourth overall selection in 1985 and made his Major League debut a year later. "Certain skills that contribute to winning – such as laying down a sacrifice bunt in baseball and hitting a mid-range jump shot in basketball – are not as present today as they once were, and it is our intention to teach young athletes their importance.

"On SportsCenter, all you see are highlights of home runs, dunks and three-pointers. You don't see the routine plays that don't show up in the box score but are critical to a team's success," Larkin added. "I was able to lay down a bunt, advance a runner from second to third by hitting a ground ball to the right side and make contact with a runner on third to get him in. Those are among the reasons why I had such a long career."

Watching a team practice in his facility's indoor baseball area, Larkin looks fit to play. His 19 seasons with one team was the longest current streak in the majors. He had hoped for a 20th and was willing to discuss returning in a utility role, but the Reds declined. Larkin said he received attractive offers from other teams. Oakland wanted him to start at second base. Even the possibility of a return to the World Series with St. Louis, whose manager Tony LaRussa asked Larkin to be the team's starting shortstop, could not persuade him to wear another uniform than the red-and-black of Cincinnati.

Bowden, formerly general manager of the Reds, hired Larkin as a special assistant in the off-season. Larkin's presence in the clubhouse and instruction to players like shortstop Cristian Guzman has been welcomed by the former Montreal Expos franchise. With Guzman struggling in the field and at the plate – hitting under .200 for most of the season

– Bowden aggressively pursued Larkin to play for the Nationals as the team battled for a wild-card berth.

“I considered it, but just as I explained to Tony LaRussa during the off-season, if I can’t give above and beyond 100 percent, I’m not going to play,” Larkin said. “I feel the same way today. It wouldn’t be fair to me or to the Nationals.”

Instead of returning to the field, Larkin says he will continue in his role as special assistant with the Nationals and work to grow Champions into a nationally-known facility, striving to have a positive influence on young athletes like his son, Shane, who plays on the Team Orlando 2011 12-and-under AAU team that Larkin coaches.

“I was fortunate to have a long and successful career with my hometown team playing a game that I have a deep passion for,” Larkin said. “Now I can help the next generation of athletes develop the fundamentals they need to succeed at every level they play.”