

THE LEGENDS OF SUMMER



Angela Henderson-Bentley/For The Lawrence Herald

Wheelersburg, Ohio, resident Gene Bennett is arguably one of the biggest Cincinnati Reds fans in the Tri-State area. Bennett, the longtime Major League Baseball scout who retired from the Reds organization last year after 58 years with the team, will head to Cooperstown, N.Y., in July to see one of his signees, Barry Larkin, get inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

Bennett heading to Cooperstown for Larkin's Hall of Fame induction

By ANGELA HENDERSON-BENTLEY
For The Lawrence Herald

WHEELERSBURG, Ohio — As any Cincinnati Reds fan can tell you, Opening Day is just two weeks away.

One of the Tri-State's biggest Reds fans is Wheelersburg's Gene Bennett, the longtime major league baseball scout who retired from the Reds organization last year after 58 years with the team. This baseball season will be a special one for Bennett as he travels to Cooperstown, N.Y., in July for the National Baseball Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony to witness former Reds shortstop Barry Larkin's induction into the Hall of Fame. Larkin is the first player Bennett signed to be elected to the Hall.

Bennett actually saw Larkin play for the first time in the Tri-State when he attended a tournament for 13- to 15-year-olds with his son, David, in Ashland's Central Park.

"I forgot who the other team was,

but they hit a ball between short and third," Bennett said. "And this shortstop went over there and backhanded that ball. He looked like Davey Concepcion. He threw that guy out and I said, 'David, you sure these guys are 13, 15 years old? That's a pretty good play for a kid.'"

After Bennett saw the shortstop make another good play, he asked his son to go find out the boy's name. It was Barry Larkin.

The Reds drafted Larkin out of Cincinnati Moeller High School, but his family wanted him to go to college. So Larkin went to the University of Michigan, where Bennett continued to keep track of his career. But when it came time for the Reds to draft Larkin in June 1985, the team nearly lost him.

"I looked at (our) draft board and we had Larkin in like the 6th round," Bennett said. "That's 180 players going

Please see **BENNETT/2F**



The Associated Press

Former Cincinnati Reds shortstop Barry Larkin speaks to reporters during a news conference on Jan. 10 in New York. Larkin — who was signed by Wheelersburg, Ohio, resident Gene Bennett — is to be inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y.

Bennett

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to be drafted before Larkin. I told (the other scouts) before we left that room, 'It's going to make you guys look foolish when we have a hometown player right here that's going to be taken in the first round and we've got no chance to get him because we've got him about 180th in the country.' Then after that, no one said a word."

When Bennett left the draft war room, as it was called, Reds General Manager Bob Howsam stopped him to ask about Larkin. "He said, 'How quick do you think Larkin will play in the big leagues?'" Bennett said. "And I

looked at my watch, and it was like 10 after 9. I said, 'Well, I'd say about 10 minutes after 9 on June 3rd. And he said, 'Are you telling me that you think Larkin can play in the big leagues right now?' I said, 'That's exactly what I'm telling you.'"

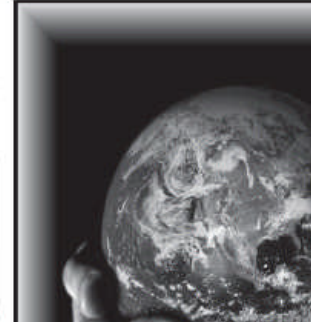
The next morning when Bennett entered the war room, the No. 1 player on the first line on the board was Barry Larkin.

Bennett is proud to see Larkin inducted into the Hall of Fame, but he has a few regrets about

two other future Hall of Famers that he wanted to sign but couldn't because he was overruled by others on the Reds staff — John Smoltz and Derek Jeter. Bennett is confident another of his signings, Reds Hall of Famer Don Gullett, would have made the Hall of Fame if not for injury.

"Percentage wise, I did pretty good," Bennett said. "I really don't remember any player that I signed that was really a flop out."

As for Bennett himself, he is staying busy with community projects like the Wheelersburg Little League and the Portsmouth Murals. He said he doesn't miss scouting. "I've got too much going on," he said.



The Herald-Dispatch, March 22, 2012