

Tommy John

Catching Up With an Indiana Sports Legend

by Marc D. Allan

Tommy John will tell you that it's better to have a surgery named after you than a disease. "By far," he says quietly.

It's one of the rare times the man -- whose name is synonymous with the career-saving elbow surgery he underwent in 1974 (and so many pitchers have experienced since) -- seems to be at a loss for words. Most of the time, the Terre Haute native is a gregarious storyteller, captivating audiences with tales of how his first professional game -- in Dubuque, Iowa -- was canceled because fish flies covered the stadium lights, and how his career was turned around after a May 1, 1977, game when his manager, Tommy Lasorda, offered guidance and encouragement rather than screaming at him.

During his speech at this year's Indianapolis Indians Hot Stove Luncheon, John also recalled playing American Legion baseball at the old Bush Stadium on West 16th Street. "I remember the brick walls, the huge centerfield and white gravel around the backstop," John says. "It was absolutely beautiful."

He also dispensed five words of advice for youngsters -- think, believe, dream, dare and commitment.

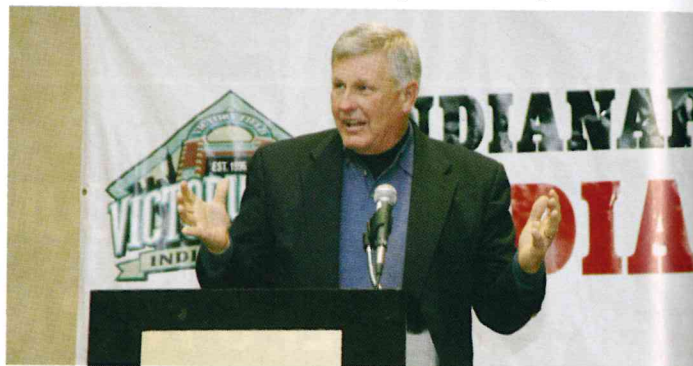
As manager of the Bridgeport (Conn.) Bluefish this season, John will share similar thoughts with his players. His knowledge should be helpful for individuals in the Independent Atlantic League. After all, John only pitched 26 years in the Major Leagues, collecting 288 wins, a 3.44 earned-run average and 46 shutouts. After the Hot Stove luncheon on Feb. 15, John sat down for an interview. You wouldn't think a conversation with a pitcher who won more big-league games than anyone not in the Hall of Fame would start with a question about basketball, but this is the hardwood heaven known as Indiana. And this is a man who was there for the most famous game in Hoosier high school basketball history.

Q: You were part of the Terre Haute Gerstmeyer High School team that lost to Milan in the 1954 Indiana high school basketball semi-finals, right?

A: I was Gerstmeyer's mascot that year. Milan beat us handily in the afternoon game at Hinkle Fieldhouse. Then, in the night game, I watched Milan beat Muncie Central on Bobby Plump's heroic shot. I was 11 years old at the time.

Q: I read that your highest salary in the majors was \$600,000 (1985 with Oakland). Is that correct?

A: Yes, that's correct. I asked my dad, "Why didn't you and mom wait 15 more years to have me? (laughing)" I thought I was stealing the money back then because \$27,000 was three years worth of work in Terre Haute. They talk about the haves and have-nots. Well, there have always been haves and have-nots in baseball, even before million-dollar salaries became common. The Yankees always had more money than everybody else. If they needed players, they would go to another team and buy a player. You make money two ways in baseball -- either by signing, developing and selling players or by large attendance numbers. The Yankees could always buy the player they needed to fit their puzzle in August.



Q: Why do we know how much players make?

A: Several years ago, Marvin Miller (head of the Major League Baseball Players Association) had player representatives put down their clients' salaries on a piece of paper. He gathered up the numbers and had them published in *The Sporting News*. The owners were absolutely aghast because players could see where their salaries were in relation to their teammates'. I think everyone likes to see what famous athletes and TV stars make. They read about famous people and think they should know everything. It's none of their business, but, unfortunately, baseball salaries have become public knowledge.

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Getting to know Tommy John

Born:	May 22, 1943 in Terre Haute, IN
Professional teams:	Cleveland Indians (1963-64), Chicago White Sox (1965-71), LA Dodgers (1972-74, 1976-78), NY Yankees (1979-82, 1986-89), California Angels (1982-85), Oakland Athletics (1985)
Honors:	Four-time Major League All-Star (1968, 1978-80)
Favorite teammate:	Reggie Jackson
Favorite manager:	Tommy Lasorda Best managers played for: Al Lopez and Dick Howser; "They understood the game and let the guys play ball."
Toughest out:	Ken Griffey Sr. "He hit about .460 against me."

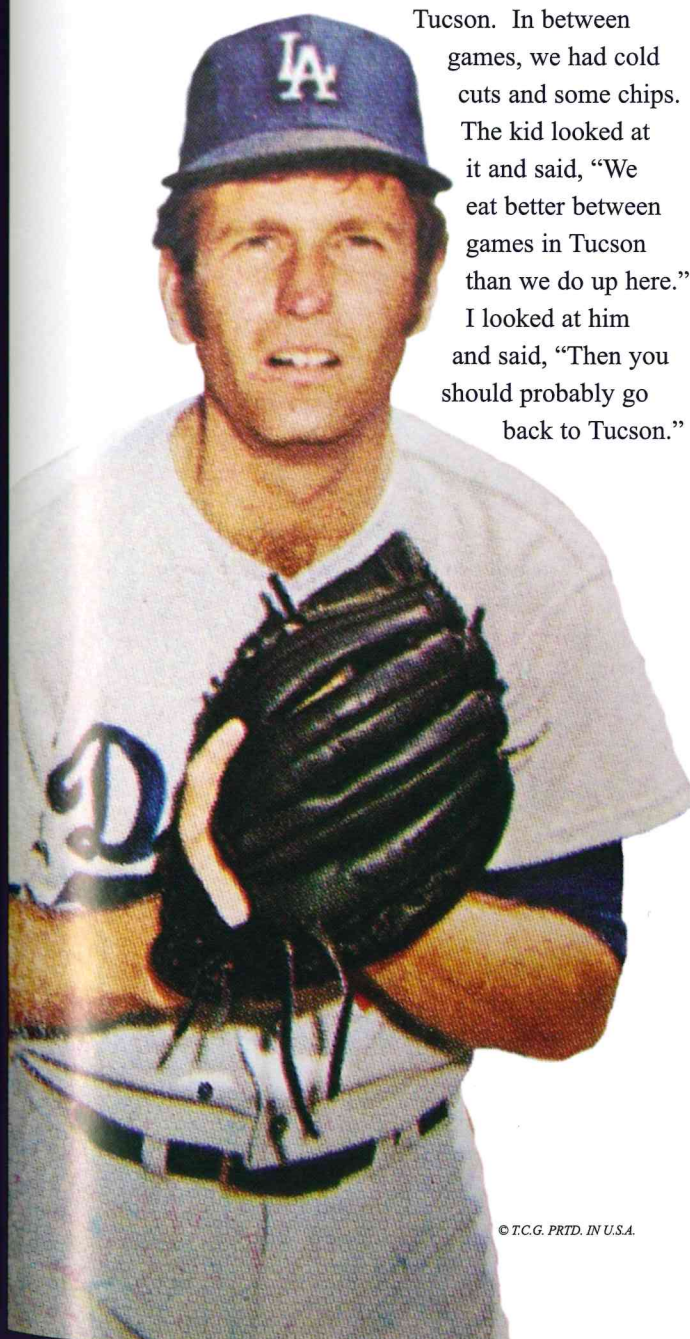
Q: But you see a guy is making \$15 million and you expect him to hit a home run every time.

A: Do not equate ability to salary. Salaries have to do with when you were a free agent and who your agent was. That's all it is.

Q: Aside from the money, what's the biggest change you've seen in baseball?

A: I was with the White Sox in 1971 when one of our players asked, "How do you expect me to hit in this baggy uniform?" Well, your uniform was your uniform. You put it on and you played. He said, "I can't hit like this." Chuck Tanner was the manager and said, "If I get a tailor in here to tailor a uniform for you, will you hit?" Chuck got a tailor, and the guy began to hit. That same year, we brought a guy up from Triple-A

Tucson. In between games, we had cold cuts and some chips. The kid looked at it and said, "We eat better between games in Tucson than we do up here." I looked at him and said, "Then you should probably go back to Tucson."



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He said, "It was more fun there," and I responded with, "I don't care if they served you nothing between games, you are playing in the Major Leagues."

Q: Let's talk about the Hall of Fame.

A: The Hall of Fame? It's in Cooperstown, and I was there for a party a couple of years ago (laughing). If I get in, I get in. I don't worry about things I can't control. I only worry about things I can control. Right now, I'm focused on how far I can hit a golf ball (laughing).

Q: Do you feel that you're deserving of a Hall of Fame induction?

A: I pitched so long that a lot of people -- toward the end -- said, "He wasn't very good." Well, that's right, but I was one of the five best pitchers the Yankees could find in those years. I honestly think I'm being held back because I was not a strikeout pitcher.

If I had more strikeouts, they would say, "He was a dominating pitcher." The only way a pitcher dominates is by striking people out. I opted to throw groundballs and low-pitch games instead of trying to strike everybody out.

Q: Listening to you talk about your career, the Hall of Fame and not winning a championship, you seem to have good perspective on things. You seem to be able to laugh about it.

A: I'm trying to remember who the manager was -- I think it was Charlie Metro. He used to have a saying, "Many are called; few are chosen." And when you think about it, a lot of people play the game, but few get chosen for the Hall of Fame. A lot of people play the game, but few are world champions. If you look at my record, I did what I was supposed to do. I'll put my record in the playoffs and World Series up against anybody in the Hall of Fame with the exception of Whitey Ford.

Q: When you had your surgery in 1974, the chance of you having successful surgery was put at 1 in 100. How did you feel about that going in?

A: I said, "Dr. Jobe, you're going to do this, give me my odds." I was a math major, and loved math. I said, "Give me odds." He said, "I can tell you this, if you choose not to have the surgery, you will never pitch or play baseball again." He said, "One in 100 is about right. Maybe two or three, but 10 would be extremely high." I said, "What are we waiting for? Let's go. I don't care if I have a 1-in-100 chance or 10-in-100 chance. They're both better than zero, and I have a chance."

FEATURES

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Q: It's pretty astonishing that the success rate now is 85 percent.

A: They've perfected the technique and rehab, but they can't perfect the healing time. Unfortunately, it takes time. You can't speed that up. It's 16 weeks now, and that's what it was for me. It's 16 weeks till you start throwing the ball. It's going to take another 8-10 months to get yourself back to where you're going to pitch. When I came back to pitch after surgery in 1976, I never missed a start until I quit in 1989. Well, I missed a start due to sickness, but not because of my arm.

Q: Do you believe in pitch counts?

A: Pitch counts are a necessary evil. I say that because they have so much money tied up in the guys now that you wouldn't want to hurt their chances. When I coached and managed in the Minor Leagues, pitchers were unhappy when you told them they were out of pitches. There's no reason why a pitcher can't train to throw 135 pitches. That's 15 pitches an inning for nine innings. There's no reason you can't throw nine sets of 15 pitches, but you have to train

for it. Just like you can't train for marathons running 100-yard sprints, you have to run miles. It's the same concept with pitching. You don't have to throw hard, but you have to throw.

Q: The players you're managing now -- do they know who you are?

A: Well, most of them know I'm the manager (laughing). Pete Rose Jr. knows what I did as a player, and a few of my pitchers might. Unfortunately, a lot of the players today aren't students of the game. They don't know the history of the game. They don't read about it. Growing up, I read so many books on the history of baseball. I read baseball book after baseball book. Guys today play the game like they're race-car drivers. A.J. Foyt, Johnny Rutherford, Andretti -- they were mechanics and drivers, and they knew how to set cars up. Now, guys just get in and drive. I asked Tony Stewart, "How he got involved in racing?" He said, "My dad was an auto-mechanic teacher at Columbus High School, and we used to tear down engines. I got interested in working on cars." But a lot of the guys now are drivers in the way baseball players are baseball players. They aren't students of the game. You should know why the game is what it is and who made the game what it is. ■

Marc Allan, who has been writing stories for the Indians' program for more than a decade, never met a Tribe fry he didn't like.

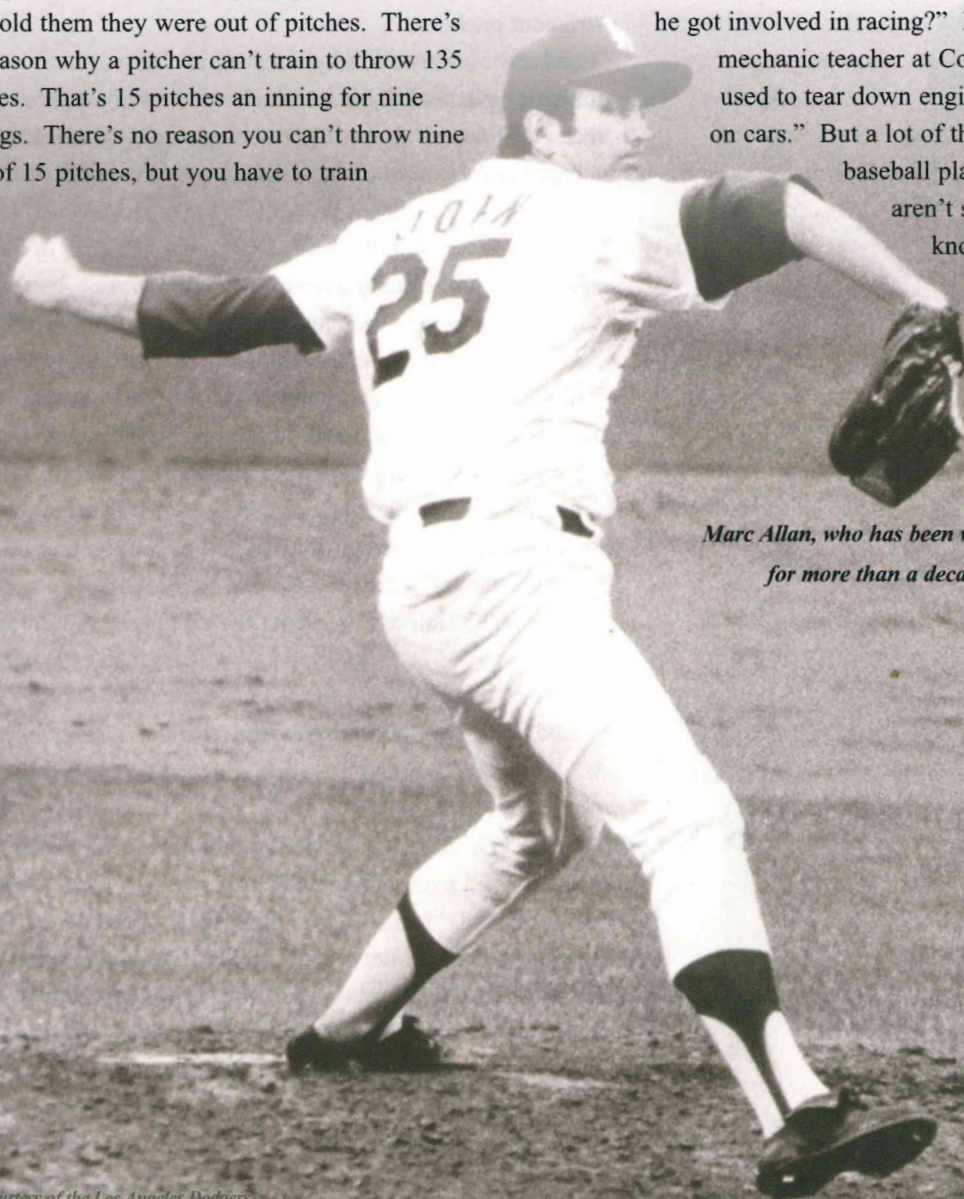


Photo courtesy of the Los Angeles Dodgers