

Jeff Lahti (1956-)

By Greg P. Jacob

When he was eight years old, Jeffrey Allen Lahti told his mother, "I want to pitch to Johnny Bench." Eighteen years later, his dream came true. Lahti pitched for the St. Louis Cardinals from 1982 to 1987, playing in three World Series games with two future Hall of Famers, Ozzie Smith and Bruce Sutter. All told, Jeff Lahti pitched 205 games, winning 17 of them and losing 11; his earned run average (ERA) was 3.12.

Lahti was born in Oregon City on October 8, 1956. Soon after, his mother, Marlene, and father, Bob Wentzel, moved to Astoria. But the marriage was rocky, and his parents divorced by the time Jeffrey was four years old. His mother then married Fred Lahti, an Astoria native and logger. Fred Lahti worked for the Columbia River Log Scaling and Grading Bureau, a job that took the family—which now included Jeffrey and his three brothers and sisters—to Hood River.

At Hood River Valley High School, Lahti earned first-team All State honors as a pitcher. He attended Treasure Valley Community College in Ontario, Oregon; and in 1976, his freshman year, the team went to the National Junior College Athletic Association World Series (NJCAAS). For his junior year, Lahti attended Portland State University (PSU), where he played for Coach Jack Dunn. In 1978, while at PSU, he signed with the Cincinnati Reds.

Lahti played single-A ball in Greensboro, North Carolina, for a season and then played double-A ball in Waterbury, Connecticut. He was promoted to the Nashville Sounds, a triple-A team that won the league in 1980. In the same year, the Cincinnati Reds asked him to join their team for spring training. He did not make the club, however, and went to play triple-A ball for the Indianapolis Indians.

Back in the Reds' spring training camp in 1982, Lahti was in the outfield on April Fool's Day. One of his teammates told him to see Chief Bender, the team's director of player personnel, because he was being traded to the St. Louis Cardinals. Jeff thought it was an April Fool's prank. He ignored the order and continued to practice in the outfield until Bender walked out on the field to give him the news.

On June 26, 1982, Lahti was called up to pitch in the big leagues with the St. Louis Cardinals, who won the World Series in October over the Milwaukee Brewers. That season, pitcher Bruce Sutter, a Hall-of-Famer, had forty-five saves (a record), and Lahti pitched in thirty-six of them. He pitched in two other World Series, but the Cardinals lost to the Kansas City Royals in 1985 and to the Minnesota Twins in 1987. During the 1985 baseball season, Lahti's ERA was 1.84, and he was acknowledged "as leader of the bull pen." In 1987, because of a torn rotator cuff, he retired from the team and from professional baseball.

As of 2010, Jeff Lahti was living with his wife Deana and five children in Hood River, where he works as an orchardist, growing pears and apples.

Sources

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