

# All-Star Game Preview in This Issue

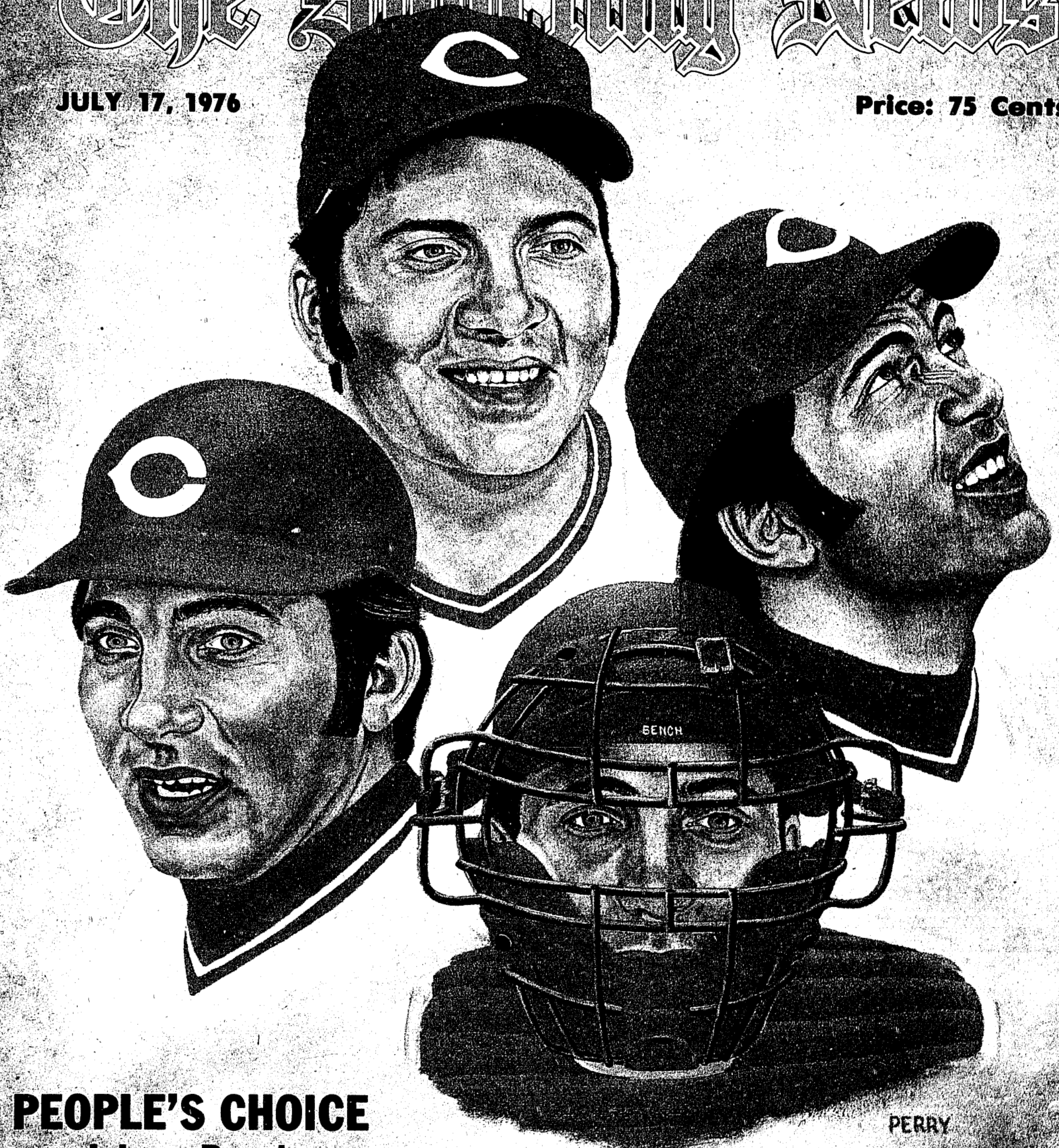
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**PEOPLE'S CHOICE**

**Johnny Bench  
Cincinnati Reds**



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By EARL LAWSON

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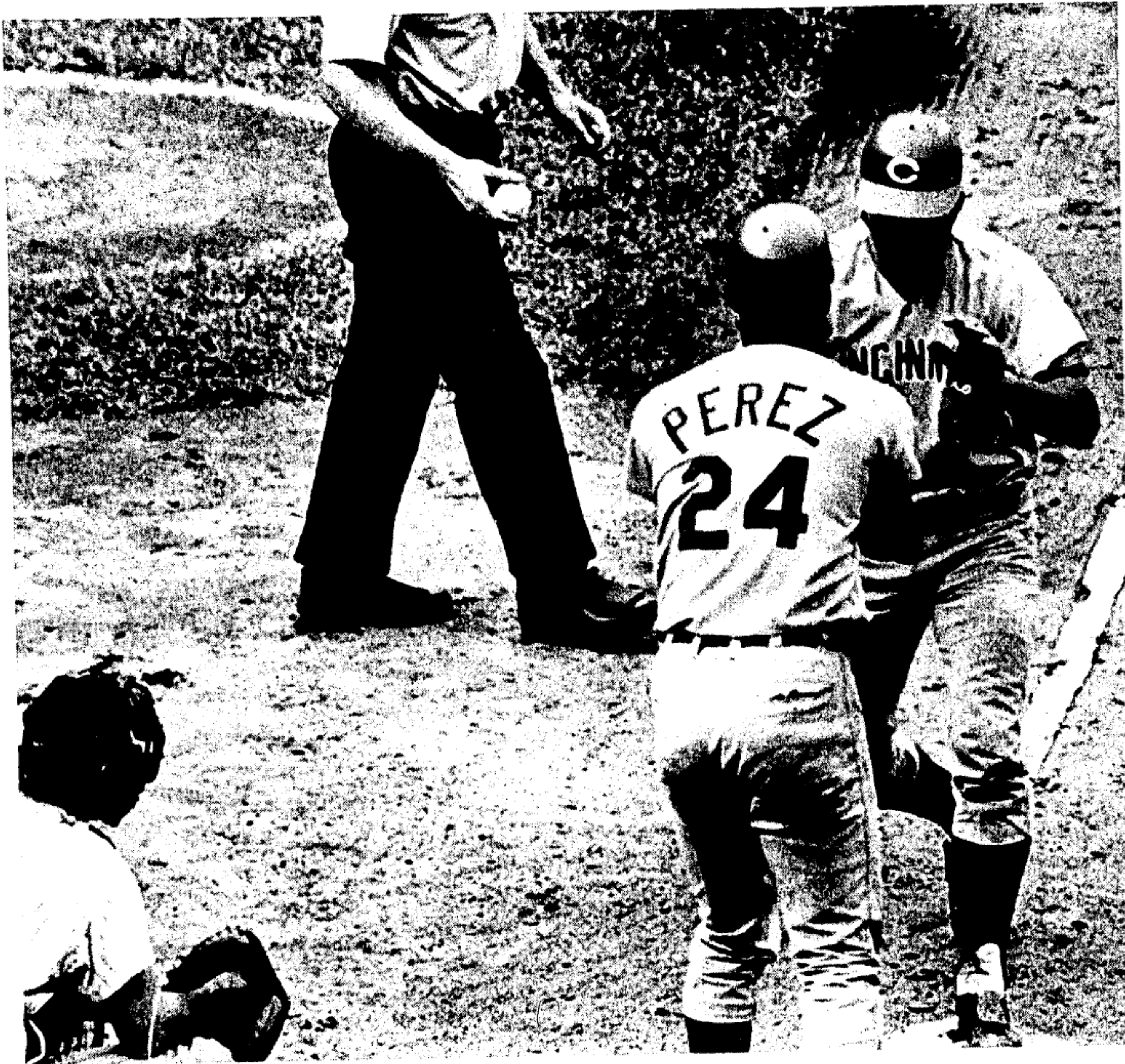
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# Fans' Support Thrills All-Star Bench

By EARL LAWSON

CINCINNATI—Even before the announcer booms out the names of the players who'll start for the National League All-Stars at Veterans Stadium, Johnny Bench can hear the thunderous boos of the irate Philadelphia fans.

"And," said Bench, "I can't say I'll blame the Phillie fans. When you're having a good year, you feel you should be recognized. The fans in your city feel the same way."

Bob Boone, the Phils' catcher, is having the type of year you'd expect of an All-Star. When the balloting ended, Boone was batting over .300 and was one of the prime reasons the Phils were making it a runaway race in the National League East.

MEANWHILE, Bench, experiencing what for him is an off-season with the bat, was trying to keep his batting average around the .250 mark.

Despite the discrepancy in batting averages between Bench and Boone, the tally of the votes by the nation's baseball fans left no doubt as to whom they considered the better of the two.

"Sure the vote of the fans means a lot to me," said Bench.

Everyone is susceptible to flattery, and Bench is no exception.

"It's a real feather in your cap when you get the fans' vote," said Bench. "I've got to be honest. It means a lot to me to know that when the fans think of a catcher, they think of me."

Bench figures he's not the only player whose name will be greeted by boos when the All-Star lineups are announced.

"It's going to be the same way with Pete Rose if he beats out Mike Schmidt at third base," said Bench. "And judging from the last returns I've seen, Rose will."

THERE WAS A time when boos bothered Bench.

"Those days are gone now," said the Reds' catcher. "But though you can understand the reaction of the fans, you still hate not to be appreciated."

When Bench squats behind the plate to signal for the first pitch of the 1976 All-Star Game, he'll be appearing in his ninth straight midsummer classic.

His first was back in 1968, his rookie season with the Reds.

"It now seems years and years ago . . . a lot more than just nine," said Bench.

As the Red catcher talked, a listener was remembering a prediction Preston Gomez, now a coach for the Cardinals, made at the beginning of that 1968 season.

Gomez had seen Bench play in Puerto Rico the winter of 1967.

"I tell you something," Gomez remarked early that spring of 1968. "That Bench, he just a baby now . . . only 19 . . . but I can tell you now he gonna be the All-Star catcher in this league for at least the next 10 years. You mark my words."

A LISTENER, too, couldn't suppress a smile remembering a similar compliment paid Bench by Atlanta Braves' Manager Dave Bristol, who gave Johnny his first chance to play for the Reds.

"When did you first realize Bench was a major leaguer?" someone asked Bristol not too long ago.

"The first time I saw him play," was Bristol's answer.

The first time Bristol had seen Bench play was in the fall of 1965 in the Florida Instructional League, where Johnny had been assigned after catching for the Reds' Tampa farm club in the Florida State League.

"That was some experience, walking into the clubhouse and suiting up for that 1968 All-Star Game . . . mingling with Willie McCovey, Willie Mays, Bob Gibson and Juan Marichal," recalled Bench.

Of those he mentioned, only McCovey still is active.

"It's a little sad, seeing players come and go," Bench added wistfully. It was as if he were visualizing the day when someone would speak of Bench's career in the past tense.

SOME PLAYERS, Pete Rose, for example, can remember practically every game they've played, how they fared and which pitchers they hit best.

"I can't," said Bench. "But I know I've

had good success hitting in the All-Star games most years."

Statistics support Bench's remark.

The Reds' catcher has made 22 official trips to the plate in the eight All-Star games in which he has participated. His batting average going into this year's game is .409.

Bench's nine All-Star hits include three homers. He has scored five runs and driven home six.

Around May 1 of his rookie 1968 season, Bench was floundering along, barely hitting over .100. His chances of remaining the Reds' No. 1 catcher seemed slim. As for winding up on the All-Star team, the mere suggestion seemed absurd.

"But," recalled Bench, "after that first week of May, everything seemed to fall into place."

AS BENCH'S average climbed, so did his confidence. And, when it came time to name alternates to complete the National League squad, Bench had statistics to merit his selection.

"I didn't get a chance to bat in that 1968 game," said Bench, "but I did catch the ninth inning."

Bench was voted a starting berth on the 1969 All-Star team and has been a repeater ever since.

"I guess I'll never forget my first at-bat in an All-Star Game," said Bench. There's good reason. He hit a home run.

"The game was in Washington that year," said Bench. "I hit my homer off Mel Stottlemyre, the Yankee pitcher."

McCovey, though, hit two homers in that game.

"So Will," said Bench, "wound up as the game's Most Valuable Player."

The 1970 All-Star Game was played in Cincinnati's new Riverfront Stadium, which only a couple of weeks earlier had been baptized by a homer off the bat of Hank Aaron, who then was still in pursuit of Babe Ruth's record.

IRONICALLY, that 1970 All-Star Game, played before a hometown audience, is one that Bench would just as soon forget.

"If you'll remember," said Bench, "I struck out three straight times."

The pitcher who humiliated Bench was Sam McDowell, then the pitching ace of the Indians and the American League's strike-

out king.

"He was a fast-ball pitcher," said Bench, "and all he threw me were slow curves and change-ups."

"So," continued Bench, "I guess I'd have to say McDowell was the best pitcher I ever faced in an All-Star Game."

"The best pitchers I've caught in an All-Star Game?"

Bench paused a moment.

"I guess I'd have to say one was Tom Seaver in the 1970 game at Cincinnati," said Bench. "Then there was Jon Matlack in the All-Star Game at Milwaukee last year. Both of them were overpowering."

SOMEONE WONDERED aloud how long Bench thought he'd continue playing.

"I'd say," he replied, "that it depends upon how long my body permits me to play."

Squatting behind the plate year after year and game after game is beginning to take its toll. Bench's aches and pains are increasing each year.

But while Bench admittedly is having his troubles at the plate, he's still the best catcher defensively in the game. He has eight Gold Gloves, one for each of his full seasons in the majors, to offer as proof.

He has no equal when it comes to tucking away foul pop-ups. Some of his catches over the years have been incredible.

Few, if any, catchers can match his agility when it comes to fielding taps in front of the plate. And Joe Namath at his best never had a quicker release than Bench when it comes to heading off base runners bent upon larceny.

"There are guys who play injured or while enduring pain and there are guys who don't," said Reds' Manager Sparky Anderson.

"The ones who do," he continued, "I call 'gamers.'"

There was a pause.

"BENCH AND ROSE," said Anderson, "I call 'gamers.'"

Bench has had more than his share of injuries since he first began playing ball.

As a teen-ager playing for Binger (Okla.) High School, he narrowly escaped death when the brakes failed on the bus carrying the school team. A couple of Bench's teammates on that high school team weren't as

fortunate as he when the bus went tumbling down a hillside after failing to negotiate a curve in the road.

Then there was the 1966 season. Bench had just been promoted by the Reds from peninsula (Carolina) to Buffalo in the International League.

In the first inning of the first game Bench started for the Buffalo club, he suffered a broken right thumb.

His thumb mended, Bench was about to join the Reds for the last month of the 1966 season when he narrowly escaped death in an auto collision on a freeway on the outskirts of Oklahoma City.

"A guy turned onto the freeway headed in the wrong direction," explained Bench.

And the wrong direction was right at the car driven by Bench.

"I TRIED TO EVADE him," said Bench, "but he still sideswiped me."

Fortunately, a doctor was in the car immediately behind Bench and quickly administered first aid to the Red catcher before he was rushed to a hospital.

Today Bench carries an ugly scar on his left shoulder as a constant reminder of his near brush with death.

It's just speculation, but it could be that some of his present shoulder problems stem from that accident.

It was after the 1970 season that Bench received the scare of his life. That was the winter he underwent lung surgery.

An MVP in 1970 when he batted .293, hit 45 homers and drove home 145 runs, Bench was weakened by the surgery performed a few months before the season opener. His batting average dipped to .238 in 1971, his home-run total to 27 and his RBIs to 61.

However, he still was a power behind the plate and at the polls. He not only won the starting berth as a catcher, but went 2-for-4 at the plate. And one of those two hits was a homer.

IN 1972, BENCH, leading the Reds to their second pennant within a three-year span, again was named the loop's MVP after slugging 40 homers and driving home 125 runs, both top figures in the league.

Last year, Bench's left shoulder was injured in an April collision at home plate with the Giants' Gary Matthews. Enough damage was done to require post-season surgery. Still, Bench won the fans' vote as the All-Star catcher. He also contributed a .283 batting average, 28 homers and 110 RBIs as the Reds piled up a club record 108 victories while making a runaway of the N. L. West race.

Bench still remembers the day back in the spring of 1968 when he met Hall of Famer Ted Williams, then manager of the Washington Senators, at Pompano Beach.

And he cherishes the ball on which Williams wrote the words: "To Johnny Bench, a Hall of Famer for sure."

Bench, like all players, would like some day to be enshrined in the Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, N. Y.

"I'VE READ WHERE I don't have Hall of Fame credentials," said Bench. "A writer in my home state pointed out I have yet to hit over .300 and that a lot of catchers not in the Hall of Fame caught a lot more games than I have."

"I'm wondering," said Bench, "if those other catchers the writer was referring to could have compiled their figures playing the night-game schedules we have today and traveling from coast to coast as we do."

Bench wasn't belittling the records of past greats. He was merely pointing out that times have changed and so have players, their equipment, playing conditions and traveling schedules.

"Naturally, I'd like to make the Hall of Fame some day," said Bench. "But I don't think it has the same luster it once did. I believe some players are getting into the Hall of Fame who aren't deserving. There's too much politicking."

ONCE HE'S eligible, Bench may not get the writers' vote. But he'd be a cinch to make the Hall if the fans did the voting.

No player in the game today is a better vote-getter than the Reds' catcher.

Count the votes!



Johnny Bench . . . Still No. 1 at the Ballot Box