



‘I should be getting better every single day’: As the Royals move forward, Mike Matheny wants to prove he can, too



By Alec Lewis Oct 31, 2019  20 

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Longtime Ohio youth baseball coach Ron Golden remembers the conversation he had years ago with Mike Matheny, one of Golden's son's best friends and baseball teammates.

Matheny, then 14, went to Golden's house in Reynoldsburg, Ohio, during an off day. He was there to hang out with Golden's son. Baseball was always going to be part of the conversation when Golden entered the living room, and when the topic was raised, Matheny's joy disappeared.

He grew unsettled — sad, even.

Matheny was struggling at the plate with some minor kinks in his swing and a bunch of plate appearances without hits. Golden knew Matheny's makeup — “He was a really serious kid who loved the team,” Golden said — and knew Matheny's frustration would have to be flushed out through conversation.

“He did not understand that baseball is a game of failure,” Golden said earlier this week. “At the beginning, he didn't understand that you're not going to go 10-for-10. You're not going to go 7-for-10. If you go 3-for-10, you're a Hall of Famer.”

The two talked things through. Golden hammered home how important it would be to continue to work psychologically and on the field. Matheny vowed to take Golden's mindset to heart and to show it.

Over the years, Golden watched Matheny live up to those promises as part of his travel program and at Reynoldsburg High School. As Matheny aged, was named a co-captain at the University of Michigan and became the St. Louis Cardinals' everyday catcher, Golden reminded himself of that conversation — not because it was make-or-break for a young kid's career but because it proved the adaptability of a smart and capable kid who could have it all.

Earlier this week, the conversation once again returned to Golden's mind when discussing the Cardinals' firing of Matheny in July 2018 after six-plus years as their manager. Managing, Golden believes, is a much different beast than playing, but a commitment to lessons such as those Matheny learned as a teenager remains.

On Thursday afternoon, inside a steamy interview room at Kauffman Stadium, Matheny cemented that belief during a news conference to introduce him as the 17th manager of the Royals.



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We have named Mike Matheny the 17th manager in franchise history. [#AlwaysRoyal](#)



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“(Since I was fired), it’s been nothing but learning,” Matheny said.

“There are people that either grow (or) are stuck. Right away, I tried to be an honest evaluator. I was trying to get as much feedback as possible. I talked with (Royals general manager) Dayton Moore a lot about blind spots. I need to identify the blind spots so I don’t make the same mistakes twice, whether that’s tactically or relationally. ... I should be getting better every single day, and I want to create an atmosphere like that here.”

Admittedly, Matheny needed to be an honest evaluator in all aspects of his life: not just for his wife and five kids, but also in an effort to continue managing, something he has grown to love more than playing. After conversations with folks around baseball, Matheny believed that if he vowed to learn from the mistakes made in St. Louis and was able to show growth, he could earn an opportunity to manage again.

He held conversations and worked with a media consultant — on smiling, of all things — while serving as a special advisor to Moore. Through those efforts, Matheny proved he could replace longtime manager Ned Yost, who retired after the season ended. How Matheny handles the role could one day lead to a story similar to Golden’s.

Matheny understands that.

“I plan to make a trip or two to where some of the players are collected and sit down with them and just start the conversation: ‘What is it that I can do to help?’” he said Thursday. “I care about these guys. That’s easy to say. But I think over time, you can prove what you’re all about, what your intent is.”



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As it relates to what went wrong at the end of Matheny's tenure with the Cardinals, intent plays a big role.

On Thursday, Matheny made his Cardinals managerial mantra clear: He wanted to earn his players' respect daily, a goal that did not have many

negative repercussions when St. Louis was winning. And early on, it was winning a lot.

Matheny, who played 13 years in the big leagues and won four Gold Glove Awards as a catcher, replaced legendary manager Tony La Russa in 2012. La Russa led the Cardinals to a World Series the year before Matheny took over, but Matheny led the team to four straight playoff appearances in his first four years on the job. No manager had done that before, and no manager has done it since.

“When he started managing — and I think it’s happened to a lot of guys after Mike — he didn’t really have experience pulling the trigger,” La Russa said. “And that is a big disadvantage because no matter how much you’ve paid attention, when you’re the guy in the end that said, ‘I’m going to make that move, I’m going to make this move,’ rather than saying, ‘If it’s me, I’d do that,’ there’s an art to that. And you have to learn how not to get distracted, how to keep your focus and so forth. To all of us, if you look at his record (591-474), including me at this point, I’d take his winning percentage right now.

“I think he came in there with a lot of leadership as a team, a lot of respect points. And he learned on the job as far as being the final decision-maker.”

The need for continued learning amplified when the Cardinals began to struggle; the early success masked much of Matheny's inexperience, such as building and maintaining relationships with players, employing certain analytics and even handling the media.

Each played a role in the Cardinals' decision to fire Matheny, an event he said knocked the wind out of his sails. He had grown up within the organization and worked alongside owner Bill DeWitt and president of baseball operations John Mozeliak for years. More than anything, though, he had grown to love managing so much that two days after the Cardinals fired him, he believed he was ready to manage again.

First, though, he knew he needed to learn, grow and improve from folks who could help foster each attribute.



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In fall 2018, an opportunity to join the Royals organization surfaced. The first day he walked into Kauffman Stadium, rode the elevator up to the executives' offices and spoke to people within the organization, the situation felt right.

“I remember that day extremely well for one reason more than any other,” Matheny said. “When I left, I went home to my wife, Kristen, and our kids, and said, ‘I don’t know why, I can’t explain it, but I truly believe this is where I’m meant to be.’”

In weeks, he and Moore had conversations about noticing blind spots. In months, Matheny connected with a longtime journalism professor who explained the role of the media and how Matheny could work differently with reporters going forward by being less rigid and less guarded.

One way to do that? By smiling. By showing the joy the professor believed Matheny had.

Matheny also went back to school and took classes on analytics. Specifically, baseball analytics.

“I’m fascinated by them,” Matheny said. “What’s out there? What are we missing? How can we think outside the box to have an edge? Anybody that’s turning a blind eye to the info is going to be a fossil in this game. It’s not just what’s the norm, but what’s next?”

The steps showed Matheny's willingness to grow. His presence around organizational fixtures such as Rusty Kuntz showed Matheny's personality.

During the season, while he was reflecting on his own personal growth and conversations with mentors such as Golden, Matheny refrained from doing interviews and getting in the way of big-league activity to allow Yost and the players to do their jobs, even after Yost said Matheny would be the perfect replacement.

After John Sherman and other executives conducted interviews with candidates, they decided Matheny was the man for the job — a man who had shown a willingness to pursue personal growth, a man whom they believed players would aspire to play for.

During one of those final conversations, Sherman posed a question to Matheny: Why?

Why did he want to be the manager of the Kansas City Royals?

“The why was this: I truly see something very, very special about to happen here,” Matheny said. “And I want to be a part of it. Now I’m ready to get to work.”

