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### Sports heroes tout products to aging nation

By **Daniel Connolly**

**Contact**

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Former baseball star Willie Mays had a DeSoto County audience roaring with laughter Thursday during a special appearance to promote HealthSpring Inc. health insurance.

By coincidence, fellow baseball Hall of Famer Johnny Bench was scheduled to visit patients at Methodist North Hospital on the same day during a visit to promote Stryker artificial hips.

The visits by the former baseball luminaries demonstrate how companies across the health care spectrum are marketing to an aging American population with increasing medical needs.

Many companies, especially in the orthopedic medical device industry, are using athletic heroes from the past to sell products to people whose bodies are breaking down.

"With the aging process of America and the prospects that we're all living longer, the warranty on these joints, they don't last forever," Bench said in a telephone interview before his Memphis trip.

The 59-year-old, a catcher with the Cincinnati Reds from 1967 to 1983, said he suffers from baseball-related joint problems.

He had hip replacement surgery three years ago, and is now a paid spokesman for Stryker Corp., the Kalamazoo, Mich.-based company that made his implant.

Medical device makers are increasingly using celebrity spokesmen as they complement their traditional marketing to surgeons with direct-to-consumer advertising.

Stryker also employs golfer Jack Nicklaus, who also received one of its implants.

Former tennis champion Jimmy Connors is a spokesman for Arlington-based medical device maker Wright Medical Group Inc., and former gymnast Mary Lou Retton promotes products by Warsaw, Ind.-based Biomet Inc.

Critics have argued that the companies promote expensive items that aren't necessarily better than older alternatives. The companies defend the quality of their products.

Mays came to the area to promote health insurance, not artificial hips, but the aging, medically needy audience was the same.

Since last year Mays has worked for HealthSpring, a Nashville-based private insurer that specializes in Medicare Advantage plans for the elderly. The company opened an office in Southaven Wednesday, and organized a luncheon event with Mays at the DeSoto Civic Center Thursday.

A HealthSpring representative talked about the company's insurance plans for the elderly before Mays took the stage in front of an audience of several hundred people, most of them elderly.

The crowd gave him a standing ovation as he came to the podium.

Mays barely mentioned HealthSpring, other than to thank the company for giving him the chance to travel around the country and meet people.



Mike Brown/The Commercial Appeal

Major League Baseball Hall of Fame catcher Johnny Bench jokes as takes his hat off and rubs his head on Gussie Boyd's hair at Methodist North Hospital Thursday. Bench, there to promote Stryker artificial hips, visited several patients who had undergone hip or knee replacement surgery.

Instead, he told funny stories about his days in the Negro Leagues and his career with the New York Giants, the San Francisco Giants and the New York Mets.

He asked the audience trivia questions in exchange for prizes.

"What year did I leave New York to go to San Francisco?"

The answer is 1957 -- a trick question, he said, since the season started in 1958.

Soon he had given away all the HealthSpring hats and the cap he had worn into the event.

He was about to answer an audience question when he suddenly stopped, remembering something he had forgotten.

"What stadium did I play at when I was in Memphis?" he asked.

Several people in the audience shouted "Martin Stadium!" Mays played at the old ball field when he was a member of a Negro League team.

With no more hats to give away, Mays whipped off his purple tie and gave it to Chester Matthews, 65, one of the people who had given the correct answer.

Later, he pulled out a wad of cash and gave a \$100 bill to a woman who answered another trivia question.

At one point, a HealthSpring executive read an audience question about his biggest accomplishment. The question referred to baseball, but Mays jokingly made it about his current job.

"Well, you hired me!" he told the executive. "How many 75-year-olds can get a job like I have?"

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