

*un*scripted

*the unpredictable moments
that make life EXTRAORDINARY*

ERNIE JOHNSON JR.



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In honor of my father, Ernie Johnson Sr.
In admiration of my mother, Lois
In gratitude to my sisters, Dawn and Chris
In love with my wife, Cheryl, and our amazing kids,
Eric, Maggie, Michael, Carmen, Allison, and Ashley



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FOREWORD

I HAVE ENCOUNTERED all kinds of people in the sport of baseball as well as outside of sports, and hands down Ernie Johnson Jr. is one of my favorites in the world. Ernie and I go way back—back to the days when his father called Braves games, games where I was on the mound doing my best to throw out the next batter.

As a pitcher you have the luxury of working five days and then listening or watching games four days. I would catch games on TV from the clubhouse while charting games and listening to the Braves' broadcasters. Ernie Johnson Sr.'s voice was one I came to rely on and cherish. In addition, the players travel with the broadcasters, so we were all one big family.

I have gotten to know Ernie Jr. as well and saw the bond that he and his dad shared. These days, we hang out once a week, if our schedules allow, in a Bible study with some other guys. (You'll read about us in these pages.) So when I say I know Ernie, I say that not only because the same sport employed us but because we have spent quite a bit of

personal time with each other. I've gotten to know his heart, and what a heart it is.

We used to have more time together, Ernie Jr. and I. After retiring, I got to work alongside him calling games for TBS. I will never forget those times we had, traveling together and witnessing some historic plays. It was then that I witnessed his struggles and family moments that all of us have to deal with. The way he handled these struggles—struggles that stretched his faith and patience beyond what most of us could handle—will forever be stitched in my mind. You're a giant, Ernie.

Now I am going to confess something I probably shouldn't. Truth is, I have started and failed to finish many books. But I finished *Unscripted* in three days, which in and of itself is a major thing for me. But more importantly, it's a testament to this: Never will I find a finer man than Ernie Johnson, whose profound humility and love for God and his family are so evident here. Ernie is not perfect and has not done everything right in his life, but he has a deep desire to live a purposeful life that honors God.

I promise you will be moved and inspired by his story. This book could quite possibly transform your attitude as well as your heart toward all of life. As I read it, I found myself wanting to be a better man. *Unscripted* is a must-read, and I know you will be as captivated as I was when you read it.

John Smoltz, Atlanta Braves pitcher, Hall of Fame 2015

INTRODUCTION

IF YOU INCLUDE THE VERY FIRST TIME I sat behind a microphone as a twenty-year-old, sweaty-palmed junior at WUOG, the University of Georgia's student radio station, I have been broadcasting for forty years now. I've made my living on television for the last thirty-eight, most of those as a sportscaster, and yet there is no guarantee you know who I am.

Maybe you're not a sports fan, or perhaps you've made a conscious effort to keep your TV viewing to a minimum. I have no problem with that; in fact, my wife, Cheryl, fits that description on both counts, especially the "not a sports fan" part of that equation. In the pages that follow, you'll get to know Cheryl very well, and I am certain you will find her as enchanting as I did when I met her thirty-seven years ago.

So all of that being said, let me introduce myself. I am Ernie Johnson Jr. Those of you who already know me from my work on the Turner networks, TNT and TBS, will probably refer to me as the guy who hosts the show *Inside the NBA*, which features NBA Hall of Famers Charles Barkley

and Shaquille O'Neal and two-time NBA champion Kenny Smith, or as the guy who calls Major League Baseball with another Hall of Famer, Cal Ripken, and all-star pitcher Ron Darling. Still, while my appearances on television perhaps gave you a clear idea of what I *do*, they did not necessarily tell you who I *am*.

That changed dramatically in the spring of 2015.

It is quite rare in my business for one network to air a feature on a personality from a competing network, but that is exactly what happened in 2015. Jeremy Schaap, an award-winning journalist for ESPN, approached me about producing a profile of my family. He was aware that my wife, Cheryl, and I are the parents of six children, four of whom are adopted, three of whom have special-needs, and one of whom has a fatal disease (muscular dystrophy). Jeremy knew of my past battle with cancer and about the bond I shared with my late father, another longtime broadcaster, Ernie Johnson Sr.

Jeremy wanted to tell my story on the network's *E:60* news-magazine show. My wife and I were hesitant at first to allow television cameras that kind of access into what had always been a very private part of our lives. But then we thought about the possible benefits. What if this feature struck a chord with parents who were considering adoption or were going through the daily rigors of caring for a special-needs child? What if it encouraged a man or a woman faced with the reality of chemotherapy? Or what if it helped to strengthen or repair the relationship between a father and a son?

We agreed to allow Jeremy and his producer, Dan Lindberg, to have at it. What they produced—a twenty-five-minute feature titled *My Story: Ernie Johnson Jr.*—did all of the things

Cheryl and I prayed it would. The response was staggering and humbling, and more than a year later, as the program has re-aired and been distributed online, I continue to hear from fathers and sons and cancer patients and adoptive parents and moms and dads with special-needs kids who were impacted in some way by the heartfelt presentation Jeremy and Dan produced. We are eternally grateful.

And so now I have done something I have long thought about doing, even before that *E:60* piece was ever conceived. I have written a book—the one you’re holding. I call it *Unscripted* not only because it is the perfect description of the show I am blessed to work on with Charles, Shaq, and Kenny but also because my life away from the TV cameras has been one unscripted, unforeseen, unforgettable moment after another.

My wish is not that you regard our family in some glorified, elevated way. Far from it. My wish is that this book will speak to you on some level right where you live in the area of parenting or faith or heartbreak or triumph.

And my wish is that this book will honor my father.

And my heavenly Father.

Here’s to embracing the unscripted.

Enjoy.

1

Blackberries

IT WAS A FASTBALL, about belt high. I say “fast” meaning it was a straight pitch, not a curveball or a slider. Dads whose sons were in a league of eight- and soon-to-be nine-year-olds in the mid-1960s didn’t let their sons throw breaking stuff.

Anyway, I had a good look at this belt-high fastball from my position at shortstop in a game that we, the Vees (don’t ask, I don’t know), were leading by a couple runs. That lead was in jeopardy because this belt-high fastball, which I had such a good look at, was lined over my head before I had a chance to take my glove off my knee. It bounced once in left center field and cleared the chain-link fence, which no player in our league had ever cleared on a hop, much less on the fly, so this ground-rule double was pretty impressive in my book.

The hit scored the runners from second and third and tied the game. This necessitated a meeting on the mound so our coach could tell us, the infielders, what we should do if the next ball was hit to us now that the go-ahead runner stood

at second, still grinning about his display of eight-year-old power. The coach had his say. We nodded as if we understood the defensive strategy he had outlined, though I'm pretty sure our first baseman was thinking more about how good a snow cone would taste when this game was over. So was I. It may have been an early Saturday morning, but it was Georgia, and it was hot. It was "try not to think about snow cones in the middle of the game" hot. And so we, the Vees (look, maybe the league was just using the alphabet to name teams; I don't know, so stop asking), trotted back to our positions, and that's when this story, for me, became worth telling.

You see, before another pitch could be thrown, we had to find two of our outfielders. When that belt-high fastball had been sent screaming, or at least speaking in more than an indoor voice, over my head and into the gap, our left fielder and center fielder had converged and had had the best seats in the house to watch the ball hit the grass and disappear into the trees and bushes and underbrush that adorned this part of the ballpark where no ball had ever gone before. And during our meeting of the minds on the mound, they apparently had taken it upon themselves to climb the chain-link fence and retrieve the "Official League" baseball. This was not necessary because, while the league may have been strapped when it came to naming its teams, I am certain the umpiring crew was equipped with more than one baseball for a game of this magnitude. Perhaps they had wanted to find that ball and award it to the peewee power hitter, who was now flexing his biceps at second base while waiting for play to resume. Whatever their motives, the search was under way, and the rest of us Vees (don't even . . .) sprinted toward the fence to provide encouragement, or point to where we

thought the ball had gone, or simply ask, “Why are you on that side of the fence?”

As it turns out, this was not a search that would require a compass or bloodhounds or even twenty-twenty eyesight. The ball had come to rest in plain sight about ten feet past the fence. Our two missing outfielders had seen it. But they had also discovered a blackberry bramble, and it was filled with a mother lode of ripe and apparently delicious blackberries. While the infielders were getting chapter and verse from the coach on what to do if the ball was hit in our direction, our left fielder and center fielder were stretching their skinny arms through the bramble, deftly avoiding the menacing thorns, rejoicing in their discovery, and testifying to another reason this game is indeed our national pastime.

I’ll be the first to admit this may not be a thigh-slapping, gut-busting story. It is unlikely anyone who hears it will immediately jump on their Twitter account and give it an LOL. It probably falls more into the “Oh, isn’t that amusing?” category. But a game that features a blackberry delay struck a chord with my dad. And oh, by the way, I have no memory of how the rest of that game turned out. From that point on, it simply became “the blackberry moment.”

It would be years before that story became, for me, more than the tale of a Little League game delayed. We would tell and retell that story in our family and laugh each time as if we’d just gotten back from the ballpark. My father was a major league pitcher in the 1950s, most notably as a reliever for those great Milwaukee Braves teams, and he delighted in the innocence of that story. As he transitioned from the playing field to the broadcast booth, as the Braves moved from Milwaukee to Atlanta, he was a regular on the banquet

and luncheon circuits. If you were a member of the Kiwanis Club, the Optimist Club, the Jaycees, the Rotary Club, or the Salvation Army, you heard Ernie Johnson Sr. deliver a speech.

I loved to tag along. I loved to hear again what the members of those clubs were hearing for the first time. What it was like to play alongside the likes of Hank Aaron and Eddie Mathews and Warren Spahn and Lou Burdette. What it was like to pitch to Stan Musial and Ted Williams and Jackie Robinson. And what was even better than hearing my dad tell those stories was hearing and seeing the reaction. Belly laughs . . . palms hitting tables, making silverware clink against plates and drinking glasses . . . middle-aged men trying to catch their breath before the old right-hander uncorked another gem from the memory bank.

Every once in a while he'd throw this one in: "And then there was that morning when little Ernie, and he's seated right down here in front, was playing a peewee game over at Murphey Candler Park. . . ." And the story of the blackberry moment would be told by the greatest storyteller I ever knew.

In many ways that story has become central to my perspective on you name it: work, relaxation—shoot, life. It's a kind of parable about not being afraid to step away from the game (translated the job, the meeting, the conference call, the list of emails, the seemingly pressing matter at hand) to appreciate the unexpected, unscripted moments. When I stop to think about it, it's always the blackberry moments that stand out when I think about the wide variety of sports I've had the chance to be a part of in the winding course of my career.

In 1998, I was doing track and field play-by-play at the World Cup finals in Johannesburg, South Africa. Know what I remember most about that trip? Not the 100- and 200-meter

golds won by Marion Jones, remarkable as they were. No, it was a visit to Soweto a day or two before the runners ran, the pole-vaulters vaulted, the high jumpers jumped, and the steeplechasers did whatever steeplechasers do. I'd heard about Soweto. It was a focal point in the fight against apartheid. It was there in June of 1976 that thousands of high school students staged a protest march—the Soweto Uprising—that turned deadly as South African authorities opened fire.

Now, twenty-two years later, I was riding in a van with a producer and a video crew following a busload of US athletes to the township where a new sports center for kids had been built. I looked out the window of the van at the rows upon rows of what were basically tiny huts with tin roofs, thinking at times it appeared a neighborhood had been built on a landfill. And I saw this brand-new facility and this sea of kids and parents waiting outside for this busload of athletes to arrive. And I remember the smiles. I still have photos of that day on the shelves of my home office, and every time I look at those snapshots I see something new and the feeling of that day returns and I feel lucky. USA Track and Field gave us T-shirts to give out to the kids, and I have pictures of tiny kids wearing extra-large T-shirts that nearly touched the ground. There's a picture of me reaching to shake hands with a group of kids, and they're laughing, and so are the moms and a grandmother. There are looks on faces that say, "Who's this guy with the receding hairline and the plastic credential hanging around his neck?" or "What's with this hand extended . . . Do you want me to slap it or shake it?" Oh, that day was marvelous. And I remember, as we drove back to our Johannesburg hotel that evening, we saw the sun setting in our rearview mirror so brilliantly that we had

to pull over so we could take pictures. The Creator had his paintbrush out again, and it was a spectacular finish to an unforgettable day.

I'll tell you the truth. I had to look up on the internet the highlights of that 1998 track meet, but I will never forget those Soweto images or that sunset. That's what unscripted blackberry moments do. I think God has placed blackberry brambles along the paths we walk every day. We just need the eyes to see them, the ears to hear them, and the hearts to detect them. All that stands in the way is the busyness of life. We're all so focused on sticking to the script from one day to the next, one meeting to the next, one sales call to the next, that we blow right by the unscripted moments that can profoundly impact not just our lives but also the lives of those with whom we share the planet, the workplace, or a home. If there's one thing life has taught me, it's not to *fear* the unscripted but to *embrace* it.

On August 16, 2011, the story of the blackberry moment at that Little League park and all it has meant occupied my every thought. Soon it would come spilling from my own lips as I delivered my father's eulogy.