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\$42 million guy next door

Strong work ethic, faith play major roles in Suppan's life

By GARY D'AMATO
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Posted: Feb. 18, 2007

Granada Hills, Calif. - You can find out just about everything you need to know about Jeff Suppan, speaking strictly statistically, by studying the back of his baseball card.



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The neat little rows of numbers tell the tale of a consistent, durable pitcher who has compiled a 106-101 record and a 4.60 earned run average over 12 major-league seasons. He has made at least 31 starts in each of the last eight years and has averaged 193 innings over that span.

That's what the Milwaukee Brewers are getting in the right-handed Suppan, who signed a four-year, \$42 million free-agent contract - the richest in club history - on Christmas Eve.

If you want to know *who* the Brewers are getting, you have to come here, to the picturesque San Fernando Valley north of Los Angeles, where Suppan still lives within a few miles of his boyhood home, his parents, his high school and many of his closest friends.

Suppan hasn't forgotten where he came from because he never left. Sure, he has pitched for Boston, Arizona, Kansas City, Pittsburgh and St. Louis - where he helped the Cardinals win the World Series last year - but this always has been, and always will be, home.

We know what you're thinking: Big-league baseball player with a big, fat contract, living in the shadows of Hollywood. If ever there was a recipe for a guy to worship at the altar of Me, Myself and I, to measure his self-worth by the toys in his garage, to be blinded by his own bling, this is it.

Except Suppan, 32, is none of those things. He is, instead, everything you would want your neighbor, your friend or your son to be. He is a principled man, fiercely loyal, considerate, intelligent and disarmingly friendly. And he is largely unimpressed with

himself.

Brewers/MLB



Photo/AP

Jeff Suppan works out at Spring Training Sunday afternoon.



Photo/AP

Pitcher Jeff Suppan participates in a bunting drill Sunday afternoon.

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"People think baseball players are all about the money," says Andy O'Donnell, who went to high school with Suppan and remains one of his best friends. "When I introduce him to people it's always, 'Jeff from down the block.' Afterwards, they're, like, 'Wow, I had no

idea he was a major-leaguer.' Nor does that ever play into his ethics."

This is who the Brewers are getting: Less than one week after the Cardinals won the World Series, Suppan spent an entire day at his alma mater, Crespi Carmelite High School, where he talked up the school during an orientation for eighth-graders.

This is who the Brewers are getting: Though he has an extensive collection of baseball memorabilia in his house, the only photo on display in the living room is that of Suppan kissing the ring of Pope Benedict XVI during a trip to the Vatican in 2005.

A devout Roman Catholic, Suppan picks up the photo and stares at it.

"One of the greatest experiences of my life," he says.

On a sunny day with the temperature in the mid-80s - hot for February even in L.A. - Suppan changes into his spikes, grabs his glove and walks across the nearly grassless football field behind Crespi.

In a few days, he would leave for spring training in Arizona - Brewers pitchers and catchers reported Saturday - but right now there's nowhere he'd rather be.

Suppan loves everything about Crespi, a Catholic, all-boys college preparatory school in Encino. He's on the board of directors and co-chairs a capital campaign, to which he has quietly and generously contributed. He still attends school functions and was fired up for a basketball game against valley rival Notre Dame last week. He even organized his 10-year class reunion.

"Crespi is family-oriented," he says. "Our theme is 'We are family' and it's helped me develop good relationships with a lot of different people. There is a good retreat program here and I went on spiritual retreats that helped my growth. This school helped me become a man."

Suppan works out at Crespi nearly every day in the off-season and today, a gangly, tousle-headed sophomore named Spencer has gotten a pass from economics class to catch him.

The two loosen up, the smack of ball in glove growing sharper with each toss. Then Suppan throws off a mound for 15 minutes and paints the black with a variety of fastballs, sliders and curves, all the while explaining to Spencer what he's doing with each pitch and why.

As he finishes, his personal trainer, Kathy Boyd, shows up. For the next hour, under the blistering sun, Suppan runs dozens of sprints and agility drills and does core exercises with a medicine ball.

"What I love about 'Soup' is his preparation," says Adam Wainwright, one of Suppan's teammates in St. Louis. "He's like a machine. He's very consistent when he pitches because he's very consistent with his preparation. I like his running program and I like his throwing program. I like everything he does."

Suppan's 44-26 record over the last three seasons and his success in the post-season made him an attractive free agent, but his durability was equally important to the small-market Brewers, who cannot afford to make a \$42 million mistake.

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He has gone on the disabled list just once in his career, with a strained ligament in his right elbow in September 1996.

"I think I'm able to repeat my mechanics, which helps," he says. "When I play catch there's a purpose. I get my work in and then I stop. I always have a purpose when I play catch or throw bullpen or anything like that.

"A coach one time told me, 'The best ability is availability,' and I think that's true. You can have a lot of talent but if you're not able to go out and perform you're not helping out."

Suppan never went to college because he was drafted by the Boston Red Sox out of high school and reached the big leagues at 20. But he's knowledgeable and well-spoken on any number of topics and is engaged in the world outside baseball in ways that would be foreign to many of his peers.

Daily, he puts into practice the concept that "a Crespi man is a lifelong learner." Ben Sheets will hit for the cycle before you can name a major-leaguer other than Suppan who actually works on increasing his vocabulary.

"Being a lifelong learner, that's so important," he says. "I think that keeps you humble. I think what happens with some people is that they say, 'I've figured it out.' And then you're shutting off to a broader understanding."

Suppan grew up in nearby West Hills, the youngest of five children in a close-knit family and the only one to attend private school, though his brother Mike now teaches at Crespi. Their father, Larry, worked as an air traffic controller at Los Angeles International Airport.

"He never, ever, talked about his job," Suppan says. "When he came home he'd go work in his garden or play catch with us. That was his release."

Suppan has pitched some of his best games in the post-season, where the pressure is greatest, because he's able to block out the distractions and focus on his job, much as his father did.

From an early age, Suppan displayed the traits his friends describe today: the work ethic, the dedication, the unwavering consistency in his approach. He made the varsity baseball team at Crespi as a freshman and pitched a no-hitter.

"He was already a professional then," says Scott Muckey, the longtime coach at Crespi. "The way he handled himself, the way he approached baseball - he was very professional in the way he went about it. When he graduated, I thought he would throw a major-league pitch. I didn't know what would happen after that, but I thought he would at least get there."

Suppan spent just 1½ seasons in the minor leagues before the Red Sox called him up in 1995, but he was not an instant star. He won one game in each of his first two seasons, went 1-7 in 1998 and didn't win 10 games until '99, when he was 10-12 for Kansas City.

He never threw the ball 95 mph, so he had to learn how to pitch, how to set up batters, how to find their weaknesses and exploit them. He credits Red Sox pitching coach Al Nipper for much of his success.

"I had to learn different ways to get guys out," Suppan says. "I just kept on that path, kept working on location and I got better and better and I started seeing what hitters were trying to do."

In 2006, Suppan went 12-7 for the Cardinals and was named the National League Championship Series MVP after winning Game 3 and allowing just five hits over 15 innings in two starts against the New York Mets.

Though he owns a 5-0 record and 1.76 ERA in seven career starts at Miller Park, Milwaukee wasn't on his radar when he began the free-agent process.

It wasn't until Suppan and his agent, Scott Leventhal, met with Brewers officials over dinner at the L.A.-area home of team owner Mark Attanasio that he thought Milwaukee could be a good fit. Within days, they had a deal.

"Obviously, financially it was a great, unbelievable contract," Suppan says. "That was one factor, but it wasn't my main thing.

"I think money is a big blessing, but it's obviously a big responsibility. A lot of people don't handle it well. Whether I have money or I don't have money doesn't change the person I am."

•

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Over lunch at a Mexican restaurant, Suppan addresses the topic of his Catholic faith and the stand he took during the World Series against Missouri's Amendment 2, which won voter approval and provides constitutional protections for embryonic stem cell research.

He is a bit uncomfortable, saying he rarely opens up to the media about such personal matters, and chooses his words carefully.

"Sure, absolutely, my faith is important to me," he says. "It is who I am. It's a part of me. I try to use that faith I have to meet challenges on a daily basis and try to be the best person that I can be."

Suppan doesn't just talk the talk. He is heavily involved in charities such as the Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund and gives freely of his time and money to Crespi and numerous organizations. As part of his contract with the Brewers, he will make an annual contribution of \$100,000 to Brewers Charities Inc.

"I think it's my duty," he says. "I think that the more is given, the more is expected."

Suppan says he is not "political" but could not remain silent during the debate over embryonic stem cell research in Missouri. He appeared in an anti-amendment TV commercial that aired the night of Game 4 of the World Series, a game he was scheduled to start.

"The game got rained out and we played the next day, which was great for me," he says. "It was tough. You have all these doubts in your head, like, 'What are people going to think?' But I did what I thought was right. It's not easy to stand up for what you believe in.

"My biggest fear, or one of them, was that it would become a distraction to the team. I knew that was a possibility. It didn't reflect on my teammates or the organization in any way. It was my personal opinion and I felt I wanted to give it. It was a decision I made and I stuck by it."

Suppan says he has no problem with adult stem cell research, but adds: "I don't believe in taking embryos and killing them. I don't believe in cloning. I believe in life and I believe in protecting it."

Whether or not you agree with him, it's hard not to respect a man who is steadfast in his beliefs and convictions.

That is Suppan. That is who the Brewers are getting.

"He wants to do his best for his teammates and the fans and the city he's in," says O'Donnell, the friend since high school. "That will never change. He always goes above and beyond what people expect of him."

People in Milwaukee expect a lot of Suppan. But not nearly as much as he expects of himself.

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