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San Francisco Chronicle

Why Giants' Jeff Samardzija is a big fan of prospect Steven Duggar
John Shea

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Giants pitcher Jeff Samardzija paid Steven Duggar a nice compliment Sunday.

"He seems like a player who would do this in his free time if he could," Samardzija said.

Another day in the Cactus League, another impressive game for the Giants' 24-year-old center fielder. Duggar made a diving catch of Chase Utley's liner and hit his third home run in a 9-3 loss to the Dodgers.

Duggar has seven hits in 17 at-bats, and his defense, speed, baserunning and exuberance are refreshing on a team that figures to be the oldest in the majors.

"He's been fun to watch," said Samardzija, who was bailed out by Duggar's catch that ended the second inning with the bases loaded.

"As a former high school center fielder myself, I really enjoy watching guys who enjoy playing the position because it's a really fun position. You're in charge out there. Every ball is yours if you can get to it. It's cool to see anyone, let alone a young kid, take that mentality out there."

Duggar has a chance to win an Opening Day roster spot, perhaps in a platoon with Austin Jackson. A left-handed batter, Duggar must continue to produce offensively; he's already considered major-league-ready defensively.

"It's realistic," manager Bruce Bochy said of Duggar's chances. "You see him playing a lot. We'll stay open-minded when deciding who the 25 guys are."

Duggar said he gets his biggest kicks out of defense: "For me, there's no better feeling than tracking down a ball and keeping those guys off the scoreboard."

What about hitting a home run? "That one's up there, too," he said.

Duggar has received offensive advice from infielders Brandon Crawford, Joe Panik and Pablo Sandoval and defensive tips from outfielders Andrew McCutchen and Gregor Blanco.

And last year, Willie Mays.

"I talked to him about center field, pre-pitch routines, drop steps, stuff like that," Duggar said of the Say Hey Kid. "Reiterating some things he's done well."

Very well, in fact.

Berman's plan: Samardzija gave up one run, three hits and three walks in two innings. The walks came consecutively. He thought he threw strike three past Kiké Hernandez to end the second, but umpire Mark Ripperger called it a ball.

"I just thought everybody had tee times here," Samardzija said. "Apparently, Mark doesn't have a tee time."

Samardzija walked Hernandez and Chris Taylor to load the bases before Duggar robbed Utley. Had Ripperger called strike three on Hernandez, Samardzija would have come out to pitch the third, and some mischief involving Chris Berman would have ensued.

Samardzija and Berman, the longtime ESPN broadcaster and longtime Giants fan who served as a guest manager, had arranged for a comedy bit.

However, the extra pitches Samardzija needed to throw ended any thought of starting another inning.

"He really wanted to come and take me out of the game," Samardzija said. "I was going to show him how upset I was, you know, a little football mentality, back and forth."

San Francisco Chronicle
Chris Berman (guest) manages Giants in loss to Dodgers
John Shea

Chris Berman managed the Giants.

One more time for effect.

Chris ... Berman ... managed ... the ... Giants.

The long-time ESPN broadcaster was at Scottsdale Stadium on Sunday as a "guest manager," accompanying Bruce Bochy in the dugout during the Giants' 9-3 exhibition loss to the Dodgers.

"This is an honor," Berman said. "I've been a fan forever."

Berman and Jeff Samardzija planned a comedy bit for the third inning, but Samardzija needed to throw extra pitches to escape a second-inning jam and never got to the third.

“He really wanted to come and take me out of the game,” Samardzija said. “I was going to show him how upset I was, you know, a little football mentality, back and forth.”

Berman got his chance in the seventh when Bochy sent him to the mound to pull Jose Flores for Dan Slania. After Flores walked off, Berman waited several seconds to signal for the right-hander.

“I just don’t do this every day,” Berman said.

“We all have our own style,” Bochy said. “That’s his style. He sends the pitcher off, and then he waits for a while and then calls for the next one.”

Did Berman even know who the pitchers were?

“Oh, yeah,” Berman said. “Burkett and Swift.”

Berman was a Giants fan since they played in the 1962 World Series, and he shared a story of the first time he saw the Giants play. It was May 4, 1963, at the Polo Grounds, then the Mets’ home field.

It was a birthday party, and Berman was 8.

“I kind of remembered that they got 17 runs,” he said. “I looked it up the other night. This is amazing. I looked up the box score: 17-4 on May 4, 1963. In the lineup that day for San Francisco was Willie Mays, Willie McCovey, Felipe Alou in right field, second baseman was Joey Amalfitano and mopup was Gaylord Perry.

“Those five guys, 55 years later, were all in the park (over the weekend). And as Felipe points out, there were six people. I was there. But 55 years later, this is the box score. They’re in this park? Isn’t that cool?”

Berman added, “It’s unbelievable. Felipe homering in the first inning against Roger Craig? And here he is? Are you kidding me?”

What’s Berman’s managing style?

“My style will be Bochy to my left, Bam (Hensley Meulens) and (Ron) Wotus to my right, and now what?” he said. “I think it’ll be something like that.”

Bochy and Brian Sabean, Berman’s long-time buddies, asked him over the winter to step in for a day and help manage. Berman wore No. 83 as a tribute to his wife, Kathy, who died in May in a car accident. They were married in ‘83.

“That’s the right number,” Berman said.

Samardzija relayed that Berman spoke to the team before the game.

“Obviously, his situation was a lot more serious than ours was last year,” said Samardzija, whose team lost 98 games, “but he kind of equated it to down times and how you respond to them. There are always

two ways you can go when things like that happen. Obviously, everybody wants to choose the correct path of going forward.”

Berman was alongside Bochy during Bochy’s postgame session with the media.

“It’s a beautiful game. You’ve got to have some levity with the game,” Bochy said. “We didn’t play that well today, but still, for a life-long Giants fan to hang with us, we were honored.”

MLB.com

Duggar making serious push for center-field job

Chris Haft

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. -- A rookie's goal is to make club management want to see more of him. On Sunday, Steven Duggar left the Giants hoping for the sight of him on at least 150 occasions between late March and October.

Duggar, 24 and the Giants' No. 3 prospect, used Sunday's 9-3 Cactus League defeat at the hands of the Los Angeles Dodgers as a platform to demonstrate why the Giants consider him a legitimate candidate to become their regular center fielder.

Duggar ended the second inning and a bases-loaded Dodgers threat with a lunging catch of Chase Utley's line drive, displaying the fielding range the Giants want from the next man to patrol AT&T Park's vast center-field acreage.

Employing what looked like a relaxed yet quick swing, Duggar opened the Giants' half of the third inning with his third spring home run. That lifted his Cactus League batting average to .412 in seven games.

"He looks like a ballplayer, for sure," Giants starter Jeff Samardzija said. "He's out there trying to win a job, and it's nice to see that he understands that. That awareness is important."

San Francisco's other contenders for the center-field job -- Gregor Blanco, Gorkys Hernandez and Austin Jackson -- are more experienced than Duggar. Yet none of them may match Duggar's potential.

Giants manager Bruce Bochy refused to name a favorite to claim the position.

"We're going to stay open-minded as we decide who the 25 guys are [on the Opening Day roster]," Bochy said.

Bochy admitted that Duggar is "making it tough on us," referring to himself and the club's other decision-makers.

Duggar, whom the Giants selected in the sixth round of the 2015 Draft, won't let himself assume anything.

"For me, it's day by day," Duggar said, describing his approach to the spring. "As simple as that sounds, that's how I go about things."

Bochy was especially impressed with Duggar's home run. Many Cactus League round-trippers travel unusually far due to wind or the thin desert atmosphere. But Duggar's clout off Kenta Maeda almost looked as if it had been struck by Willie McCovey, the legendary Giants slugger who was in attendance on Sunday.

"That wasn't an Arizona home run," Bochy said. "That ball goes out anywhere."

Like a surprisingly high percentage of talented outfielders, Duggar prefers to steal runs from opponents rather than generate offense himself.

"There's no better feeling than making a catch to keep guys off the scoreboard," he said.

MLB.com

Berman brings levity, perspective to Giants camp

Chris Haft

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. -- Asked whether he knew the names of the pitchers he exchanged in the seventh inning of the Giants' 9-3 Cactus League setback at the hands of the Los Angeles Dodgers, Chris Berman didn't hesitate.

"Oh, yeah. [John] Burkett and [Bill] Swift," Berman replied, citing the Giants' pair of 1993 20-game winners.

That prompted laughter from everybody who heard Berman's remark. Such was the general mood around the club on Sunday as Berman, the longtime ESPN announcer who happens to be an ardent, lifelong Giants fan, served as honorary manager.

For all the hilarity Berman generated, his appearance was a poignant one. He happened to be visiting the Giants in the visitors' clubhouse at New York's Citi Field last May when he learned that his wife, Kathy, had died in an automobile accident.

During the offseason, Giants manager Bruce Bochy and director of baseball operations Brian Sabean arranged Berman's special visit. Clad in a full Giants uniform, Berman wore jersey No. 83, symbolizing the year when he and Kathy met -- 1983.

"I know he's been through a lot in the last calendar year, and he gave us a little speech when he was inside [the clubhouse]," Giants right-hander Jeff Samardzija said. "[He] equated it -- obviously, his situation was a lot more serious than ours was last year -- to down times and how you respond to them."

Injury update

Right-hander Mark Melancon, having recovered from forearm surgery, is scheduled to pitch Wednesday against San Diego.

Up next

Shortstop Brandon Crawford (right index finger), who has been limited to four games as a designated hitter, is expected to play in Monday's exhibition against the Texas Rangers. Left-hander Ty Blach will start for San Francisco against ex-Giants lefty Matt Moore. The 12:05 p.m. PT matchup will be available via an exclusive audio webcast on SFGiants.com.

The Athletic

Giants manager for the day Chris Berman is floored by reunion 55 years in the making Jimmy Durkin

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Chris Berman had to look up the box score. He knew the general details of his first Giants game. They scored 17 runs and beat the Mets at the Polo Grounds, who were still playing in the Giants' old home before Shea Stadium was built. It was 1963, a trip to the park with his dad, uncle and eight boys packed into two station wagons for his eighth birthday party.

But as he prepared for his day in the dugout as the Giants guest manager, the retired ESPN sportscaster wanted to dig into the full details of the first time he laid eyes on his favorite baseball team.

The internet is great for many things. This is one of them. Go ahead and take a look at the box score from that May 4, 1963, game.

Berman was right, the score was 17-4, and he was even more impressed when he looked through the lineup. And then he showed up at Scottsdale Stadium on Friday and that box score came alive.

Felipe Alou, who batted second that day and hit a first-inning home run off future Giants manager Roger Craig, was at the park.

Willie McCovey, batting third and starting in left field, was there, too. And, of course, so was cleanup hitter Willie Mays. Second baseman Joey Amalfitano, also present. And finally, Gaylord Perry, who pitched the final three innings to get the save, was there, as well.

"Fifty-five years later, this is the box score, they're in this park," Berman said. "Isn't that pretty cool? If that doesn't get you a little chicken skin, what does? ... I just can't get over it. That is unbelievable."

It might've been six if it weren't for the health issues that Orlando Cepeda, who homered twice that day, is dealing with. Cepeda is said to be doing better recently and he spoke with KNBR's Marty Lurie on the phone Saturday.

Berman is managing today at the invitation of Bruce Bochy and Brian Sabean, two close friends of his.

"This is an honor. Fan forever," Berman said.

Berman was with Sabean at a Giants game at Citi Field last May when Berman's world was crushed by the news that his wife Kathy died in a car accident. He's wearing jersey No. 83 because that's the year they were married.

"I thought that was the right number to choose," Berman said. "Plus, I didn't think there was any receiver No. 83 who had their number retired by the Giants yet."

No, but it was Jeff Samardzija's number when he was a wide receiver at Notre Dame. And Samardzija just so happens to be on the mound Sunday against the Dodgers. Berman said he'll visit the mound at least once but figured he better do it early enough when he still knows the names of who's in the game.

"This will be fun," he said. "I'm not going to get in the way of anything. I didn't come in and change a whole lot."

If his first foray into the dugout Saturday was any indication, he may be a good look charm. He was there to get a feel for the flow and speed of the game and addressed the team.

"They let me talk to them yesterday, they won two games and got nine home runs in three hours," Berman said. "I said something else today, we'll see if it carries over."

The Athletic

Giants outfielder Austin Jackson chose baseball over basketball, but he can still soar a little Jimmy Durkin

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Austin Jackson grew up in Texas playing two sports ... and wait, neither of them was football?

"Ah man, my mom," Jackson said with a chuckle recently at his Scottsdale Stadium locker. "Yeah, my mom wasn't having it. Probably too skinny to be out there anyway."

Well, he did actually hit the gridiron for one year. This is Texas, after all, in the Dallas suburb of Denton, and so he played one season while in seventh grade.

Jackson, signed by the Giants during the offseason to a two-year deal and expected to contribute at all three outfield spots, played a little bit of everything during that year of football. Quarterback. Running back. A lot of receiver. And safety.

"I liked safety," Jackson said. "Kind of like center field a little bit. Kind of just roam, get to hit people when they weren't looking."

Did the 6-foot-1, 198-pound Jackson miss out by not playing football? Probably not. The two sports he chose — and the one he eventually focused on — worked out very well for him.

Before he signed his first professional baseball contract (and he nearly didn't sign, which we'll get into), Jackson was a point guard in basketball ... and a good one.

Athlon Sports rated him the nation's No. 10 point guard in the 2005 high school senior class and overall he was a top-100 player in the nation. He signed a letter of intent and was going to play both basketball and baseball at Georgia Tech, where he could've been teammates with former Warrior and NBA veteran Anthony Morrow and maybe picked up a few football pointers from future Hall of Fame receiver Calvin Johnson.

But the MLB Draft came calling and the Yankees took Jackson in the eighth round, leaving him with a tough decision: Sign for an above-slot bonus of \$800,000 — then a record for an eighth-round pick — or go to school and try to be a two-sport star.

You know what he chose, but how close was he to going to Georgia Tech?

“I was actually really close,” Jackson said. “I went to sign with the Yankees down in Tampa and had second thoughts and actually left Tampa the day that I was supposed to sign. Went back to Texas and kind of thought it through a little bit more.”

Within a couple of days, he made his decision. The money, a chance to help his family out at such a young age, was too good to pass up. Factor in just how difficult it would’ve been trying to play two sports in college — especially with basketball and baseball’s overlapping seasons — and the decision was made.

Jackson remains grateful for the fact that the Yankees never pressured him and didn’t pull back when he left Tampa without signing.

“Getting a second chance (to sign) was pretty big,” Jackson said. “They were patient with me and they understood.”

His competitive hoop days are long behind him, but his game on the diamond will always be enhanced by his time on the hardwood. He was a Kobe Bryant fan but also had good reason to look up to Allen Iverson, the 6-foot guard who played with such tenacity.

“Not that he was an underdog, but he kind of gave off that attitude,” Jackson said of Iverson. “His size ... I think that was the main thing that you see, but you realize that he’s bigger than that just because of his attitude — that never-give-in attitude.”

But there was more than a mentality gained from his basketball days. The athleticism the sport requires translates.

“You think about the foot speed, you have to have the coordination, the ability to jump — all those things can help with other sports,” Jackson said. “Baseball, obviously being in the outfield, first-step quickness is key. It’s the difference between catching those in-between balls.”

And there’s the hops. You can’t hoop without hops and you can’t rob home runs like Jackson famously did to Hanley Ramirez last year at Fenway Park without them either.

There’s a story Andrew McCutchen has told about seeing Jackson dunk while wearing flip-flops. Asked to confirm, Jackson smiled.

“I used to get fly a little bit, believe or not,” he said.

He doesn’t go around dunking just for fun, but when he needs to test out his legs, it’s a go-to move. Take 2016, when he tore the meniscus in his left knee in June and missed the rest of the season. As he went through rehab, he was feeling better but needed confirmation.

“I told them, ‘If I can dunk, then I know I’m back!’” Jackson said. “If not, then I know, hey, I need to do something. But once I finally started dunking, I was like, ‘OK, I finally got my legs back.’ That was the final test for me. If I can dunk, I’ll be all right.”

He's admittedly still gathering his legs here this spring. Jackson played the outfield on Thursday for the first time and was back in center field Saturday in the split-squad road game at Goodyear. He went 2 for 2 batting in the leadoff spot.

Jackson isn't a guy the Giants are looking at as a full-time starter, but he's a legitimate big league talent who can contribute to their revamped outfield. It's no secret the Giants needed some new blood after last year's stinker and he seems like a great addition to the clubhouse. And the basketball player in him is already looking over at the Warriors for any lessons that can be gleaned from the reigning NBA champs.

"They're having fun, that's the thing," Jackson said of the Warriors. "I think we look at it like, 'Oh, they lost two (in a row).' They're laughing still, they're still enjoying themselves. That's how you know a team is good, when they can lose and laugh about it."

The Giants didn't have that luxury last year as they stumbled to 98 losses. Great chemistry can help a club, but how many bad teams have great chemistry? I'll wait while you count 'em up. It won't take long. Shared success often is what builds that chemistry.

But there are little things Jackson sees that the Giants can pick up on.

"You see the way a team can rally around each other and be great together, as opposed to just one," Jackson said. "You can tell that they really genuinely like playing with each other and they enjoy that. You see the success that a team has with any sport and you watch, you pick up things that you see that has to be a reason that they're winning. They're enjoying each other, they're talking and communicating with each other on the floor, they're getting each other involved."

Baseball doesn't lend itself necessarily to getting your teammates involved. A center fielder can't make sure the third baseman gets a couple of ground balls. But with all the downtime of baseball, be it during the game or just the long days at the ballpark, staying engaged and together as a team can help.

"Baseball is obviously different than most sports, you do a lot of things alone, but it's all to contribute to the team," Jackson said.

That's what Jackson will try to do for this year's Giants. His role will be defined in time, whether he ends up earning the bulk of playing time in center field or just roaming the three spots. But he'll be there, waiting to contribute ... and waiting to leap over some walls.

Jeff Samardzija allowed a run, three hits, walked three and struck out two in his second Cactus League start Sunday, a 9-3 loss to the Dodgers. His second inning got stretched out when he didn't get a called third strike on a pitch to Kiké Hernandez that had catcher Nick Hundley trotting off the field. Samardzija delivered the perfect zinger to home plate umpire Mark Ripperger after his outing.

"I just assume everybody's got tee times here," Samardzija said. "Apparently, Mark doesn't have a tee time."

That forced Samardzija into a little extra work. He then walked Chris Taylor, his third straight walk of the inning, to load the bases before Steven Duggar made a diving catch in center field to rob Chase Utley of

a hit and end the inning. That prevented Samardzija from going back out there to start the third inning, when there was a schtick planned in which guest manager Chris Berman was going to pull him from the game and they were going to get into a mock argument.

“He really wanted to come and take me out of the game so we could get into it a little bit,” Samardzija said. “So I was trying to get there into the third so that he could come take me out and I could show him how upset I was, a little football mentality there back and forth.”

In addition to that diving catch, Duggar also hit his third home run of the spring.

“That wasn't an Arizona home run,” manager Bruce Bochy said. “That ball was out anywhere.”

Notes

— Bochy said that Brandon Crawford (jammed finger) will play shortstop for first time this spring in Monday's game against the Rangers in Surprise. Closer Mark Melancon is slated to make his spring debut on Wednesday.

— Left-hander Tony Watson pitched the third inning in his Giants' debut. He gave up three hits, including a two-run home run to Yasmani Grandal.