

NATIONAL

Pro sports figures dig into own pockets to support troops

By LISA HOFFMAN
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- On the day before his baseball team's game with Pittsburgh, Washington Nationals outfielder Jose Guillen had no intention of taking the field that night. Though he prides himself on playing hurt, Guillen's bum left shoulder and ankle were sore enough that he had decided to sit out the June 28 evening game against the Pirates at RFK Stadium. Then, on the day of the game, after spending time in the wards of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, he changed his mind. Visiting with wounded U.S. troops, many of them amputees, Guillen found the perspective and inspiration he needed to shrug off his own minor aches and do his job. Not only did he play, but he also wrote a \$10,000 personal check to the Walter Reed nonprofit group that helps the thousands of war wounded who are passing through the storied hospital. "They were my motivation to play," Guillen, a Dominican Republic native who is not a U.S. citizen, told a reporter that day. "The veterans mean a lot to me." Guillen is not alone. Players from most teams that come to battle the Nats drop by the hospital to cheer up the troops and hand out complimentary game tickets and team paraphernalia. This week, several from the Colorado Rockies are planning to go. And, like Guillen, many in baseball - as well as in professional golf - are digging into their own pockets to show their support. In April, Oakland Athletics pitcher Barry Zito created "Strikeouts for Troops," a project that has mushroomed in just four months to bring in about \$50,000 for wounded troops at Walter Reed and nearby Bethesda Naval Hospital, and their families. The money goes for everything from travel and lodging costs for families, to clothing and assorted comforts of home for the wounded. "Regardless of how you feel about the war, you have to admire the courage and spirit of the troops and respect the sacrifice they are making," said Zito, who wears a green "Support the Troops" wristband given him by injured Army Spc. Mark Gonthier at Walter Reed. Zito says he has taken it off only once - when he put it in his pocket after an umpire told him to remove it. Zito has pledged to donate \$100 for each batter he strikes out and has signed up nearly two dozen others in Major League Baseball to make similar commitments. As word has spread through the leagues, players from other positions have come on board, pledging cash for each hit, RBI or home run. (Fans are also welcome to donate via the Web site at www.strikeoutsfortroops.org). Among the notables participating so far: Boston Red Sox powerhouse pitcher Curt Schilling, Cleveland Indians pitchers C.C. Sabathia and Matt Miller, Atlanta Braves pitchers Tim Hudson, and Washington's star closer Chad Cordero, whose father was a Marine in Vietnam. Outfielder Eric Byrnes of the Rockies and 10 Oakland A's have also made pledges. "It's a great way to say thanks for what they're doing for us," Cordero said in a recent interview. The New York Yankees Baseball club donated \$75,000 to the "Wounded Warrior Project" of the United Spinal Association, a service and disability rights organization. And "Impact Player Partners," a non-profit founded 18 months ago to boost the morale of injured troops, introduces the wounded to high-profile sports figures, such as NASCAR driver Jeff Gordon, retired Chicago Bears quarterback Jim McMahon, and professional golfer Ben Crenshaw. Others in the pro golf world also are stepping up for war casualties. Pro Rory Sabbatini donates \$250 to the Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund for every birdie he records. If he gets a birdie, the charity - which aids families of U.S. soldiers who die in Iraq and Afghanistan - bags \$1,000. So far, his tab is at least \$43,000. Sabbatini also wears a pair of camouflage trousers in the first round of every tournament to promote awareness of the troops. The PGA Tour objected at first, but gave its blessing when the golfer traded his authentic "battle dress uniform" pants for more tailored slacks in a camouflage print. Phil Mickelson, the 2004 Masters champion, will kick in \$100 for every birdie and \$500 per eagle he shoots on the PGA Tour this year. The money goes to Homes for Our Troops, a Massachusetts foundation that helps adapt or build homes for disabled vets. Last year, Ladies Professional Golf Assoc. pro Catherine Cartwright kicked in nearly \$25,000 - at \$25 per birdie, and matched by pledges from supporters - to the Special Operations Warrior Foundation, which provides college grants to the children of fallen U.S. commandos. Joined this year by pro Angela Jerman, Cartwright intends to better that mark. If the testimonials received by some of these groups from soldiers is a measure, the troops who have benefited from the attention and donations are appreciative and touched by the support. "On behalf of all of us troops over here in the International Zone, Baghdad, Iraq, I would like to thank you and all the players," Air Force Staff Sgt. Jill Troiano wrote to Strikeouts for Troops. "We really, really appreciate it! It helps us get through the day knowing that we have all that support coming from back home!!"

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