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Barry Zito: Going to Battle For The Troops

The San Francisco Giants pitcher has raised nearly \$1 million with Strikeouts for Troops, which he founded to bring the "comforts of home" to wounded vets.

By Jonathan Lesser

LIKE SO MANY SOLDIERS BEFORE HIM AND SINCE, MARINE SGT. CHRIS RETURNED FROM IRAQ NOT ONLY injured — his back was broken when his Humvee blew up — but traumatized. In four months recovering at Balboa Naval Regional Medical Center in San Diego, he wouldn't leave his room and barely spoke a word. One of the few things others at the hospital knew about him was that he was a big baseball fan. ★ So when San Francisco Giants pitcher Barry Zito, the founder of Strikeouts for Troops, offered to sponsor a group of Marines recovering at Balboa on a trip to Arizona to see some spring training games and meet some players, it was decided that Sgt. Chris would be among them. ★ "He was literally forced to go on this trip to get out in public," says Richard Williams, an attorney and Marine Corps League



■ GIVING BACK / Barry Zito

member in San Diego who organized the travel. "He was a quiet dude. At the games, he didn't even want to go onto the field."

But then came dinner.

As part of the trip, Zito had arranged for about a dozen teammates, along with San Diego Padres ace Jake Peavy, to join the 15 recuperating Marines for dinner. No media, just an intimate few hours, time for the players and the veterans to get to know one another.

Peavy took a seat next to Sgt. Chris — it turns out they're both from Alabama — and before long Sgt. Chris was not only one of the most talkative people in the room, he was smiling and laughing like no one there had ever seen him do. He was having the time of his life.

"The players were rapping with these guys," recalls Williams. "Not talking about, 'Hey, I'm sorry your leg's blown off,' but, 'Hey, what did you do in high school?' Peavy and Sgt. Chris talked about John Deere tractors. It turned out to be a three and a half hour therapy session."

"It's things like that that have an impact," says Zito. "We respect these guys so much. It's fun to be able to shake their hands and say, 'Hey, thank you for what you do. You guys are the real heroes.'"

STRIKEOUTS FOR TROOPS WAS launched in 2005, the brainchild of Cy Young award winner Zito, 29, and his family. The foundation's stated mission is to "benefit our war wounded troops being treated at Walter Reed, Bethesda Naval, and other military hospitals." Zito came up with the concept of giving a certain amount of money per strikeout he gets "to make it more fun for the players to donate and for the fans to track."

Zito will give \$500 per K this year (last year he gave \$400 for a total of \$52,400), and so far he has enlisted more than 50 of his fellow major leaguers to participate (non-pitchers can donate per home run or RBI or simply give a flat amount). The roster includes players whose families have military ties, including Alex Rodriguez, Chipper Jones and Curt Shilling, and those who don't. "We don't have to come up with smoke and mirrors to sell people on this thing," Zito says. "If you enjoy your freedom and you enjoy playing baseball in front of all these fans and living this life that we're so blessed to live here in the United States, show your appreciation to the people who have



MEET THE VETS: Zito's foundation brings recovering veterans out to the ballpark. Right: Zito and Peavy present a check in San Diego. Left: Zito and Nick Swisher at a Christmas fundraising event.

been earning us that freedom since we started here almost 300 years ago."

Strikeouts for Troops has already given out nearly \$1 million in grants; and as the story above about the Marines' spring training trip to Arizona illustrates, Zito doesn't

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just raise money, he raises spirits. He says that as much as his schedule allows, he will continue to spend time with the troops.

"These are Major League Baseball players who are going out of their way to show Marines that athletes care about them," says Williams, "and it means more than just the money. Barry Zito is a phenomenal motivator, and it is so heartening to see him involved with the Marines."

When pondering a foundation to start, Zito knew he wanted to help veterans — "military and baseball, two of the great institutions of this country" — but he wasn't sure of the best way to do it. His long-time publicist, Kathy Jacobson, whom Zito calls "the secret weapon behind this whole deal," researched which veteran needs were not being met. She discovered that the men and women recovering in our military hospitals were lacking the "comforts of home."



ACE OF HEART: For every strikeout he records this year, Zito will donate \$500 to the foundation. More than 50 other players have joined his cause.

The fact is that if you have a limb blown off, as many patients at Balboa hospital have, it requires multiple surgeries and skin grafts, and while the military will pay for family to be there for the initial surgery, future visits are not covered. "What happens is, families come from Kentucky or Iowa or Alabama and stay for about 10 days," says Williams, who in 2003 started the Injured Marine Fund, which is a beneficiary of Strikeouts for Troops. "They're happy to see their Marine, but then they have to go back to younger siblings, back to work.

"At first the Marine is happy to be alive," Williams says of the first family visit, but after the second and third surgeries, "that's when reality sets in, when depression sets in, when PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] sets in, and that's when they need their parents. There's no funding for that."

Strikeouts for Troops gives out its money through grants to carefully selected nonprofit organizations that help wounded soldiers — not just Marines but from all U.S. Armed Forces — and their families. Zito personally covers all over-

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head expenses to ensure that 100 percent of the money donated by the players goes to the men and women who need it.

On the Web site are dozens of testimonials from many of those who have been helped over the past three years, and Zito has read every one. "Aside from meeting the people face to face," he says, "that's the biggest thing for me: reading the difference that we can make."

Strikeouts for Troops has paid for everything from childcare and other living expenses to a special-needs bed for an Army specialist who was permanently disabled by a suicide bomber. But mostly the money goes to keeping family nearby as the soldiers recover. "The theory," Zito says, "is that when you have loved ones at your bedside you can heal a lot better." ★

strikeoutsfortroops.org