

# Zito wrestles with mental toughness



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SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. -- Barry Zito, just your average self-improvement junkie, is always searching for new lessons to learn, brains to pick and alternate avenues to travel in the quest to upgrade his game. This is how a guy with nondescript radar gun readings signs a seven-year, \$126 million contract and aspires to 300 victories.

In seven seasons with the Oakland A's, Zito wielded a bat every now and then with abysmal results (one hit and 15 strikeouts in 29 career at-bats). Mindful that an .034 average isn't going to cut it in the National League, he hooked up with former Baltimore Orioles outfielder Brady Anderson over the winter for hitting and baserunning tips.

Before his new team, the San Francisco Giants, worked out Monday at Scottsdale Stadium, Zito thumbed through Jane Leavy's biography of Sandy Koufax for inspiration. The two lefties met at a New York baseball writers dinner four years ago and forged such a bond that Koufax gave Zito his phone number and, later, a collectible Sandy Koufax portrait painted by acclaimed sports artist Stephen Holland.

"I have it in my bedroom," Zito said. "You know how some people sleep under the cross? I sleep under the Koufax."

Zito's unquenchable desire to learn can take him to places you wouldn't expect a California surfer boy to go. Last month, for example, his inquisitiveness carried him to Iowa. And it wasn't to interview cornstalks for their take on the 2008 presidential primaries.

Between playing guitar and text messaging agent Scott Boras for job updates, Zito spent the winter working out with a friend (whose name he declines to mention) who helps him with mental and physical training. One day the conversation turned to the commitment required to succeed in the sport of amateur wrestling, and Zito was hooked.

"My friend talked about that whole wrestling energy," Zito said. "The intensity of being on the mat. The conditioning these guys go through. The one-on-one combat. I wanted to see if I could integrate that intensity and focus into my game."

Zito, naturally, wasn't satisfied with secondhand information. He hopped a flight to Iowa, in wrestling's heartland, and drove more than an hour in blizzard-like conditions and 10-degree temperatures to the National Dual meet championships in Cedar Falls in January.

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*-- Eric Guerrero, Oklahoma State assistant wrestling coach*

During his visit, Zito marveled at the exploits of University of Missouri star Ben Askren, and sought out two of the sport's giants for insights. He talked to John Smith, six-time world champion, two-time Olympic gold medalist and tremendously successful coach at Oklahoma State, and Dan Gable, former Olympic champion and coach of nine straight NCAA title teams at the University of Iowa.

At the opening of the Dan Gable International Wrestling Institute and Museum in Waterloo, Iowa, Gable reflected on the 1972 Games in Munich, where he won a gold medal without surrendering a point to any of his opponents.

"Gable was ticked off because he said he could have wrestled a lot better," Zito recalled. "We asked him, 'How can you say that? You didn't get scored on.' And he was like, 'Well, I beat this guy 5-0, and I could have beaten him 15-0.' "

Zito also discovered that there's a fundamental disconnect between his world and the wrestling universe. When Smith learned that Zito has a career winning percentage of .618, the 13th best among active major league starters, he was surprised to discover that .618 is actually considered *good*.

"He said, 'How come it's not in the 90s?' " Zito said. "It's that wrestling mentality. It's just raising the bar."

What began as a sort of benign curiosity for Zito appears to be morphing into a full-fledged fascination. He just picked up a copy of Mike Chapman's book, "Wrestling Tough: Dominate Mentally on the Mat," and he left the park Monday wearing jeans and an orange Oklahoma State University wrestling jersey.

During early spring training stretching exercises, Zito talked wrestling with Giants reliever Steve Kline, who spends each winter helping to coach the Lewisburg (Pa.) High School wrestling team. Kline sweats buckets from November through February keeping up with teenagers, and in recent years he has invited the Oklahoma State coaches and Olympic gold-medal winner Cael Sanderson to the school to give clinics.

"It's a great workout," Kline said. "There's nothing better than getting the crap kicked out of you by guys who know what they're doing."

At the moment, Zito's interest in wrestling revolves more around mental toughness and tenacity than takedowns and reversals. He sees parallels between the warrior mentality displayed by wrestlers fighting pain and unspeakable fatigue, and the mind-set of pitchers who work on an island as the focal point of a team game.

Zito is particularly proud of a start last July against Toronto, when he gave up a Troy Glaus grand slam to fall behind 4-0 in the first, yet persevered to pitch 6 2/3 innings and beat the Blue Jays 7-4. In his mind, it's very similar to the fight displayed by a wrestler who falls behind early and comes back to pin his opponent.

Zito's commitment to learning the mental game of wrestling has made an impression on Smith and OSU assistants Mark Branch and Eric Guerrero. When Zito called Guerrero two weeks ago to chat, he began the conversation by asking how Tyler Shinn, Oklahoma State's 125-pound sophomore, has fared in recent matches.

"Barry retains a lot of information, and he's very motivating to be around," Guerrero said. "It says something when a successful athlete like him is willing to step outside his little comfort zone the way he has. He's on a mission to gather information to help him be the best he can be."

Zito's open-mindedness is no surprise given his reputation as a renaissance man. He has a lifelong fondness for music and photography, as well as acting aspirations down the road. Zito contends that he's not spread too thin; on the contrary, he thinks his off-field diversions help him stay mentally fresh and productive as a player.

"There are guys in this clubhouse who go home and play video games to take their minds off baseball, and nobody says, 'You shouldn't play video games,' " Zito said. "That's their catharsis. For me, it's music. Music is my catharsis."

Actually, there's music and photography and yoga and wrestling and, of course, the art of competing with hitters. As he prepares for his transition across the San Francisco Bay, Zito says he's looking forward to playing alongside Barry Bonds, that he is not satisfied with last year's 16-10 record in Oakland and that nothing is as important to him as winning a World Series.

Now he's ready to go to the mat.