

Monday, January 14, 2008

**Bob Wojnowski:**

## Ordonez happy planting his roots



**DETROIT** -- They crowded closer and closer to the stage as the time grew near. Kids in baseball uniforms, adults in Sunday clothes, coaches in jeans. And when Magglio Ordonez appeared, his casual smile lit the room, stirring shrieks and cheers.

But this is not your normal tale of a sports star greeting his fans. When Ordonez stepped into the large community center room at Holy Redeemer Catholic Church in southwest Detroit on Sunday, he saw faces and heard voices exactly like his. He answered some questions in English, some in Spanish.

And by the time he finished speaking, after he had announced the formation of the Ordonez Family Scholarship Fund and answered questions from nervous kids, it was clear this wasn't only about baseball.

If athletes ever wonder how they can connect, how they can have an impact, they should have been in that church, the big brick structure in the middle of an old neighborhood dotted with Mexican restaurants and family owned markets.

This was Ordonez's first trip to the heart of Detroit's Latino community, and it should be the start of something special. No team has the capacity to connect with more people in this city right now than the Tigers. And here's the challenge to all of them: Connect in all the important ways, in all the important places.

"This is a great thing Magglio did," said Ish Ledesma, who has coached baseball in southwest Detroit since 1975. "He reinforced everything we've been preaching, that you've got to get your education. I've been telling kids that for years, but to hear Magglio say it, well, he just made my job a little easier."

## **A nice fit**

Ordonez and his family, working with the Detroit Tigers Foundation, will make a student's life a little easier. Every year, a qualified high school senior from southwest Detroit will receive a \$2,500 scholarship, renewable for four years if the grades stay good, up to \$10,000.

On a larger scale, Ordonez reaffirmed what the Tigers have been showing on the field for the past few years -- that the Latino community is a tremendous resource, for athletic reasons and consumer reasons and basic family reasons.

Ordonez never went to college, signing into professional baseball in his native Venezuela at the age of 17. That's one reason, at the urging of his wife, Dagly, he wanted to push academics.

Ordonez also might be the Tigers' most-popular player, from his famous bundle of hair to his ever-present smile to his pennant-clinching home run. He's entrenched here, and it was time to plant roots.

"You can do a lot of things on the field, but you also want to be recognized off the field," said Ordonez, who turns 34 this month. "I'm really happy here and I want to give something back. The more I know the city and the more I know the state, I like it even more."

Oh, he loved it plenty two years ago, when the Tigers reached the World Series. Last season, Ordonez hit 363, becoming the first Tiger in 46 years to win the A.L. batting crown.

He says he feels better than ever. The Tigers look better than ever too, and you can bet the comfort level among the team's Latin players is a factor.

When Pudge Rodriguez and Carlos Guillen arrived in 2004, they became the Tigers' most-notable Latin players. This offseason, the Tigers traded for Miguel Cabrera and Edgar Renteria, and now the entire infield will be manned by Latin players.

You could argue the Tigers didn't get great until they tapped this segment of the baseball population. The average fan might not consider that important. *Hey, if the guy can hit, who cares where he's from?*

Fair enough.

## **'He cares about us'**

The people in southwest Detroit care. Any swelling of pride in any minority community matters. It's why black athletes regularly return and invest in their neighborhoods.

It's why Ordonez made the trip Sunday and said he'd urge his Latin teammates to make similar commitments. It's why Bill Tyler, a longtime coach and teacher in southwest Detroit, was beaming.

"There was a time when all these ballfields around here were mostly empty," Tyler said. "The turnaround is amazing, and it's because kids see Magglio and Pudge and all those guys and they relate to them. They helped bring it back."

Every bit helps. Every investment -- in money or time or simple acknowledgement -- makes a difference. That's the message of this day.

I asked one of the little leaguers what it meant for Ordonez to come to his neighborhood. Jose Solis, 13, hesitated, then smiled.

"It was cool," he said. "He cares about us."

This was just one day, one star player, one terrific gesture, one profound impact. There is more, always more, to be done.

"Every year we get more fans and it's great, much different than when I played in Chicago," said Ordonez, in his fourth season in Detroit. "People here are nice. They like me and I like them. It's good. I want to be here the rest of my life."

Once you find your home and settle in, the next step is to make it better. That's the step Ordonez took Sunday. Over time, you hope more will reap the benefits, and more will follow.

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