

Casey at the bat

Newest member of the Red Sox Nation might be the friendliest guy in baseball

By Michael P. Quinlin
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With a name like Sean Casey, you're bound to get a good greeting in the Red Sox Nation, which had its not-so-humble beginnings in the early 20th century, when Michael McGreevey led a band of raucous Sox fans - many of them Irish - called the Royal Rooters.

But the newest Boston Red Sox player is a popular guy wherever he's been in his illustrious major league baseball career.

The convivial big-leaguer with the sunny disposition has always had an upbeat, outgoing personality. Over the past 12 seasons, the chatty first baseman has honed his conversational skills with the thousands of players from across the league who have landed on his base.

Last year, Sports Illustrated magazine conducted a poll of major league players, who voted Casey "the friendliest player in baseball." And he's known around the league as "The Mayor" because of his approachable demeanor.

Of course, Casey is much more than a master conversationalist and all-around good guy. He's a three-time All Star and National League MVP who has played for the Cincinnati Reds, Cleveland Indians (where he and current teammate Manny Ramirez forged a lasting friendship during their year together), Pittsburgh Pirates and Detroit Tigers before coming to the Boston Red Sox this season.

He's a backup first baseman and occasional designated hitter who is batting .370 in mid-June.

Casey grew up in Upper Saint Clair, a town outside of Pittsburgh in western Pennsylvania, where sports are a huge part of community life. Just ask Dan Rooney, head of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Casey excelled in high school and won a small scholarship to the University of Richmond, where he developed into a fearsome hitter. His senior year, he won the NCAA batting title by hitting .461.

He made his major league debut in 1997 with Cleveland, then spent the next eight seasons with the Cincinnati Reds, where he was selected to the National League All-Star team three times. He has a lifetime batting average of .302, and was named the National League's Most Valuable Player in 1999, when he batted .332.

Like any little league kid daydreaming about the big leagues, Casey got his chance to play before his hometown crowd, when he spent a year with the Pittsburgh Pirates in 2006.

"It was a dream come true," he recalled. "I was a Pirate fan growing up - watching Willie Stargel and those guys. So playing at PNC Park in downtown Pittsburgh is something I'll

never forget."

Familiar with the Bay State

Married with three children, Casey feels right at home in Massachusetts. It turns out he's been here before.

As a 20-year-old junior at Richmond, he played for the Brewster Whitecaps in the Cape Cod Baseball League in the summer of 1994.

"When I went to the Cape, I realized how beautiful Massachusetts was," he said. "I just fell in love with it up here."

That summer Casey also met his good pal Father Paul O'Brien, the dynamic parish priest at St. Patrick's Church in Lawrence who started Cor Unam (One Heart) Meal Center, feeding hundreds of working poor families in this city of immigrants.

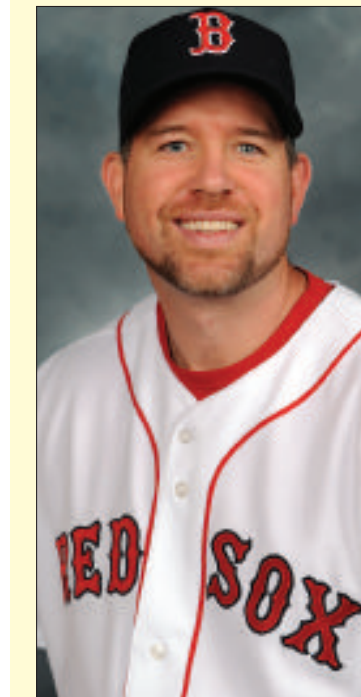
Casey and O'Brien shared an Irish-Catholic background, sense of humor and outlook on life that formed the basis of a lasting friendship.

When O'Brien became pastor at St. Patrick's in 2001, he began making plans for the pantry. He and Casey, along with comedian Conan O'Brien and others, started a fundraising campaign, titled Labels are for Jars, which raised needed funds while also discouraging negative stereotyping.

In September 2006, they officially opened the Center. Last summer, when Casey was in town with the Detroit Tigers, he went up to Lawrence to serve meals and to help spread awareness of hunger issues.

"When you give back to people," he said in a recent interview, "that's when your heart really grows."

Casey, who keeps a bible in his locker, is a man of faith whose social con-



Sean Casey Career Highlights

Drafted by the Cleveland Indians, 1995

Cincinnati Reds, 1998-2005
Pittsburgh Pirates, 2006
Detroit Tigers, 2006-2007
Boston Red Sox, 2008

National League All Star Team, 1999, 2001, 2004

Major League Hutch Award, 1999

Voted Most Valuable Player, National League, 1999

science was formed by his parents. He is also proud of his Irish Catholic heritage.

"My great-grandfather came over from County Cork around the time of the Irish potato famine, when he was fourteen years old," Casey said. "He came over to Staten Island, and ended up on Long Island."

At the top of Casey's wish list, he says, is to undertake some genealogical research and compile a family history of the Casey clan. Another goal is to make his long-awaited trip to Ireland.

"I have never been to Ireland, but I'm gonna go, I'm gonna go soon," he said. "One of my best friends, Brian Healey, is from Cork, and his family still lives there. He's promised me the royal tour."

Casey would fit right in over in Ireland, because that's the kind of guy he is. For now, he's traveling throughout Red Sox Nation, getting the royal treatment wherever he goes.

For information on Boston Red Sox, visit www.bostonredsox.com.

For information on Labels are for Jars visit <http://labelsareforjars.org/>



Fenway Park in Boston, Massachusetts — home of the Boston Red Sox and the Green Monster, aka the left field's 37-foot fence.