Johan Santana Pitching in for Charities On and Off Mound

Mets star tossed team's first no-hitter, but also helps those in need in both New York City and Venezuela

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David Handschuh Mets pitcher Johan Santana holds up copy of Daily News chronicling his no-hitter.

He doesn’t just throw historic no-hitters.

Johan Santana , who pitched the first no-hitter in New York Mets history on Friday night, also throws his time, name and celebrity behind charity work. The kind of charity work that brings this baseball god down to Earth, where he had a humble start in life in a small town in Venezuela.

“It’s important not to forget where you come from,” Santana says as he sits outside the team locker room at Citi Field on a rainy Monday morning.

“That’s why when I was with the Minnesota Twins I started my first charity, the Johan Santana Foundation, which involved buying a used yellow fire truck and having it shipped down to my hometown of Tovar. We had some terrible conditions down there — bad weather, fires, floods, mudslides. I had some firefighter friends in Tovar and I always imagined being in their situation, trying to help people without the right tools. So my foundation bought a fire engine for my hometown.”

Santana also didn’t forget being a poor kid at Christmas in Tovar.

“Every year now, we hand out 10,000 toys for Christmas for the kids back home,” he says. “The smiles on all those faces are a bigger gift for me than for them.”

His humanity off the field extends further than his home town. A few years back, Lynne Greenberg, wife of his agent, Ed Greenberg, died from the insidious ravages of melanoma.

“You just don’t know,” he says, his boyish eyes widening in sadness. “One moment, she was fine and full of life and laughter. A few months later, she was gone. So it was important to me, in her honor, to bring awareness to people about the dangers of the sun and skin cancer.”

Five years ago, Santana moved to New York, renting an apartment in Manhattan and a home on Long Island. It doesn’t take more than a lease and a J-O-B to declare yourself an official New Yorker. If your job is the star pitcher for the Mets, at $23 mil a season, you quickly assume some responsibility with the pay stub.

Santana delivered.

“When Jay Horwitz (the Mets’ public relations chief) spoke to me about a charity called Tuesday’s Children that helped families who lost loved ones on 9/11, I wanted to be a part of it,” Santana says. “That meant a lot to New York, which has been so good to me. To the whole world. I remember the day it happened, the whole world stopped. So being able to help anyone who suffered from that event was something I definitely wanted to be part of.”

Santana, who has two Cy Young Awards and a $138 million pitching contract, missed an entire season last year because of shoulder surgery. Many baseball sages didn’t think he could return. But on Friday, he made history in Citi Field when he hurled the first no-hitter in the 50-year history of the Mets.

Not even Tom Seaver ever did that.

That night, Johan Santana owned the city, the headlines, the heart of New York. But here’s a guy who can put personal triumph in perspective with one glance toward the Manhattan skyline.

“I am a New Yorker now, and like everyone else, every time you drive by Ground Zero you see all the people coming to visit and pray,” he says. “People from all around the world. It just deeply affects me. So it’s a privilege to help some of those families.”

Santana has reached out to 9/11 families in the Hispanic community; his foundation donating $10,000.

“I met with two families and let me tell you, it just breaks your heart,” he says. “One woman lost her granddaughter. One was the widow of a firefighter. I thought immediately of my firefighter friends back in Tovar. There was a direct line from my childhood hometown to my current home town. People hurting, people in need of help. Even just to know someone still cares. Still remembers.”

That’s the man behind the headlines; the Johan Santana who throws as much heart into charity as he did into that historic Mets no-hitter.