Superman

Meet Jim Thome, the Phillies' new star. Despite the fame, numbers and bucks, his cleats are planted firmly in the turf.

By Jim Salisbury
You know all those rumors about what a good guy the new Phillies slugger is? Forget them. He’s even better.

They told us Jim Thome was different. They told us he wasn’t your ordinary big-league baseball player, circa 2003. They told us he was this ego-free, no-pretense throwback, on the field and off. The on-the-field part we believed. We’d seen the brush cut, the Barryanesque physique, the high socks, the eye black, and the dirty batting helmet. We’d seen his fist-pumping emotion and heard the testaments to how, in this increasingly me-first era of pro sports, he was team-first all the time.

It was the off-the-field part we weren’t so sure about.

Thome, 32, had just signed an $85 million contract — the largest deal of baseball’s off-season — and been proclaimed the slugging savior of the Philadelphia Phillies, a potential giant of a franchise that had turned off its fans by sleeping too long.

Just how regular a dude could Jim Thome be with all this heady stuff — money and adulation — floating around? The answer came sooner than I could have imagined — in the first telephone conversation I’d ever had with the guy one night in January, not long after his wife, Andrae, delivered the couple’s first child, a daughter named Lila.

“Let me ask you,” Thome said, as if he was talking to an old high-school buddy over a Bud Light. “Did your wife

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The truth about

THOMES

Story by JIM SALISBURY
Photography by CHARLES FOX

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Jim Thome takes bunts in the batting cage in Clearwater, Fla.

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breast-fed?

That’s Jim,” said Andrea, laughing when she heard the question her husband had posed. “He’s reading a book about fatherhood. He wants to know everything.”

Thome’s passion for fatherhood can even be seen in the way he responds when it’s time for a diaper change.

“Want me to do that?” Joyce Thome, daughter of on of 15, asked her son during a visit to his Cleveland home not long after Lila was born.

“No way,” he said. “I’ll do it.”

Jim and Lila tramped off to the nursery, the tiny baby wrapped up in the behemoth’s loving arms.

“A few minutes later he called me upstairs,” Joyce said. “He just wanted to show off.”

Unless you count deer mounts on the walls at Lodge Two-Five, his beloved Illinois hunting haven, showing off a perfect diaper change is about as close as this grounded, almost too-good-to-be-true $85 million man will come to calling attention to himself.

Until the home runs start.

The Phillies are one of baseball’s oldest franchises and, historically, one of its worst, winning just one World Series in 120 years, the same number won by the Texas Rangers in 10 years of existence and the Arizona Diamondbacks in five.

Things have been particularly bleak lately. Sure, there was the World Series appearance in 1993, but that was just one of two winning seasons the team has had in the last 16 years. Before the 2001 season, his first as manager, Larry Bowa summed up the situation perfectly, telling the team it was “the laughingstock of Philadelphia.”

As the losing seasons piled up, Philadelphia’s fans began turning their backs. Season tickets, which had numbered 20,000 in 1994, crashed to fewer than 11,000 last season.

In the midst of all those losing seasons, the franchise was constantly criticized for not spending enough money to put a winning team on the field. Pitcher Curt Schilling and third baseman Scott Rolen, the team’s two biggest stars in recent years, both hammer away at ownership until they were traded in 2000 and 2002, respectively.

The Phils tried to keep Rolen, who arrived on the scene in 1997 and immediately lived up to his promise by winning the National League Rookie of the Year Award. With revenue about to increase in a new stadium due to open in April 2004, the team offered him $90 million to stay. Rolen had become so turned off with the franchise that he looked at the dough as if it were a pile of Confederate money.

With Rolen off to St. Louis, the cheap old Phillies had some money to spend.

They needed a big bat, someone who could back bone a reeking lineup that included improving young slugger Pat Burrell.

Just as important was their need for a big name — someone who could light up the marquee, touch the community. Someone to charge up the fans who remained and bring back those who had left, all in time to buy tickets and luxury suites for the new ballpark.

Unhampered at last, general manager Ed Wade spent last summer poring over the list of players who would be free agents after the season.

One name stood out: Thome. The big, left-hand-hitting first baseman clubbed 334 homers in 12 seasons with the Cleveland Indians, so he had the bat.

He also had the other stuff the Phillies desperately needed. He was a giant in the community, a goodwill ambassador with a folksy, friendly personality, a big smile, and a sparkling vein of generosity.

“The intangibles were huge,” Wade said. “A couple of the guys we were considering brought big offensive elements to their game, but they didn’t bring the other stuff that Jim brought — the ability to excite our fans with his energy, intensity and enthusiasm.”

Getting Thome (pronounced TOE-mus) wasn’t easy, and Wade knew it. The Phils had a long record of losing, and Thome’s ties to Cleveland ran deep.

Full speed ahead. With their fingers crossed and their checkbook ready, the frequently frugal Phillies — hey, Curt and Scott, can you believe it? — began their pursuit of the top free agent on the market.
Chuck Thome is a robust man of 57, built like one of those bulldozers he used to build at Caterpillar. A former power hitter himself in the leagues around Peoria, Ill., he has strong hands, a sturdy chin, and an easy smile, like his youngest son.

Every morning, Chuck climbs on his stationary bike and starts pedaling. He reaches for the VCR remote control and hits play.

“It keeps me going,” he says, nodding at the Indians’ 2002 highlights video. “I pretty much know it by heart.”

The Indians, a premier team that played in two World Series in the 1990s, scaled down their payroll and charted a rebuilding course in 2002. Jim Thome was one of the few holdovers from the team’s glory years, and he had a stellar season, smashing a club-record 52 homers, each one captured on the team’s highlights video.

“Look at this one,” Chuck says. “I love the pitcher’s reaction.”

The home runs come rapid-fire.

“You watching that again?” says Joyce, exasperated.

Chuck laughs. He says he wouldn’t have made a very good scout.

“I thought his two older brothers were a whole lot better,” Chuck says of his sons Chuck and Randy. “They were a whole lot stronger.”

Joyce sticks up for her baby. Jim is the youngest of five children, born three minutes after his twin sister, Jenny. No one, she says, could match his drive and his love for baseball, and you could see it — and hear it — almost every day in the driveway of the house where the Thome children were raised on Peoria’s working-class south side.

“We had a white rock driveway,” Joyce said. “All day long, he’d stand there and hit rocks with this old aluminum bat. I can still hear it now — ping, ping, ping. There was a garage across the street. We must have replaced all those windows.”

Jim loved the Chicago Cubs. He’d imitate every player’s swing and tell his mom he was going to be a big league when he grew up. He idolized Cubs slugger Dave Kingman.

Closer to home, his two idols were his big brothers. Chuck is 14 years older than Jim, Randy is 12 years older.

Chuck, who stands 6-foot-6, was a basketball star at Limestone High School. Randy was an excellent left-handed pitcher. When Jim first picked up a bat, he hit righthanded. Randy spun him around because he thought lefties were better hitters.

In their 20s, young Chuck and Randy played competitive fast-pitch softball. The games were wars, and so were the barroom fights afterward. Jim loved to tag along. When it came to playing ball with their little brother, Chuck and Randy were merciless.

“They’d hit rockers at him,” father Chuck says. “And if Jim shed away, he’d get help held.”

“We’d put a square on the garage door and try to strike him out,” brother Chuck says. “Wiffle balls, tennis balls, we’d throw anything at Jim.”

Over breakfast one winter day in Peoria, Chuck concurred with his mother: Jim had great drive. He never went anywhere without his baseball glove dangling from his hand or handlebars. And when it came to instruction, he gobbled everything up.

People around Peoria still talk...
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about the night Chuck snared 30 rebounds in a game.

"Did Chuck drink a lot of milk?"

Jim would ask his mother.

"Yes, he did."

"Then I’m going to drink a lot of milk, too. If Chuck can get 30 rebounds, so can I."

Jim was a star basketball player at Linsenme High. But the most rebounds he ever got was 23.

Jim was obsessed with one day being as big as Chuck. When he was about 10, he’d beg his big brother to take his shirt off and flex. Jim would then peel off his shirt and shout, “Mom, get the camera."

“I still have those pictures somewhere,” Joyce said.

Humility is a Thome family trait. Only with prodding does older brother Chuck admit that little brother Jim probably idolized him all those years ago.

“But now, I dozle him,” Chuck said. “Not just for the way he hits 50-foot home runs, but also for the man he is.”

NEW 12 was the first day teams were allowed to kid on free agents. Wade e-mailed the Phillies’ offer — five years and $70 million — to Thome’s agent, Pat Rooney, at 12:01 a.m.

That e-mail started three weeks of gut-splitting anxiety for the Phillies, the Thomes, and fans in Philadelphia and Cleveland.

Would Thome’s loyalty to the Indians and their fans keep him in Cleveland even though the team was rebuilding?

Would he take a chance that the Phillies — of all teams — could get him back to the World Series?

“Poor Ed,” said Andrea, recalling the November nervousness. “Tell him none of us were sleeping. It was some kind of wild ride.”

The days dragged by as Thome deliberated over the Phillies’ offer and a lesser offer from the Indians, who went to work on Thome’s heart, pushing hard the hometown hero concept, offering to build him a statue outside their stadium.

Wade held his breath as Thome visited the Cubs, the team of his boyhood dreams. It was a shallow flirtation.

“When Chicago went bad, it rejuvenated us,” Wade said.

Determined to get their man, the Phillies upped their offer to six years and $85 million.

Thome loved playing in Cleveland — and the fans were crazy about him. His honest, lunch-pail work ethic, his approachability, his community service, and his mammoth home runs had burned him into a civic treasure who couldn’t stop in the grocery store without signing a dozen autographs. Andrea, slow to giving birth, was from the area. Her parents lived there.

Part of him did not want to leave. But part of him did not know if, at age 32, he could wait two, three or four years while the Indians restocked their talent.

One minute his loyalty to the Indians would stir and he was staying. Then his “addiction to winning” would percolate and he was going to Philadelphia, a team that reminded him of the 1994 Indians, a team on the rise.

“Free agency is supposed to be a great time,” Andrea said, “but Jim hated it. He never wants to let people down.”

The anxiety grew. Andrea was getting ready to host 18 people for Thanksgiving, and Jim told her he’d make a decision by then.

But Thanksgiving morning came and he still wasn’t ready.

Wade rose early that morning, and wrote the Thomes a long e-mail. He explained how he had moved several times in his career, that he needed a place he loved. He told them he understood the uncertainty and the fear of leaving a place in which you’re comfortable. Wade assured the Thomes that the Phillies would do everything possible to make them feel at home.

Knowing their heartstrings were so strong in Cleveland, I didn’t want to leave anything unsaid,” Wade said.

Andrea, who later admitted that Wade’s note “meant a lot,” asked her Thanksgiving guests not to bring up the topic of Jim’s free agency. She had been agonizing. She needed a break.

“Jim used us as a sounding board,” she said. “He told my parents he felt bad taking their first grandchild away. They said, ‘Don’t worry, the baby will love us. We’ll support whatever you do.’”

The holiday weekend passed. The house got quiet.

“Honestly, I’m the one person you’re not going to disappoint,” Andrea told her husband. “You need to make a decision.”

So he did. “We’re going to Philly,” Jim said.

They hugged.

“Let’s call Pat before you change your mind,” Andrea told Jim.

Roney called Wade with the news. The Phillies, the team that stars players so frequently run from, had landed the biggest name on the free-agent market.

Emotionally spent after three weeks of paranoia and uncertainty, Wade sat quietly at his desk and let it all sink in.

Three floors beneath his office at Veterans Stadium, the phones in the ticket office began ringing wildly as word of Thome’s signing began to spread. Within 24 hours, the team sold 700 season tickets.

Jim Thome was coming to Philadelphia, and suddenly the fans were coming back.

Soon, fans had more to feel good about. The team traded for Kevin Millwood, a top pitcher from the Atlanta Braves’ vaunted staff.

The season opened tomorrow, and finally there is a buzz about the Phillies again. Finally, this team is relevant again. Finally, ownership spent the money it took to lure a great player to Philadelphia.

Will there be pressure on Thome to succeed? Sure. Professional sports are all about pressure, and the squeeze is even more intense when a sports-crazed town starving for a winner expects you to be a savior. Respond to that pressure, and you become a diamond in your community. Don’t, and you get booted.

“That’s my only apprehension,” Thome’s dad, Chuck, said. “They say they boo Santa Claus in Philly. Jim’s got that big contract, so there will be plenty of encouragement for people to boo.”

Thome has no such apprehensions. Even though he was a fan favorite in Cleveland, he was occasional ly booed when the hits weren’t dropping. He knows what it feels like.

“I want to make the fans happy,” he said. “I want to embrace them like they embraced me.”

Thome is well aware of his advance billing in Philadelphia.

He wants to live up to it, win a World Series, and end up in the Hall of Fame someday. But he does not worry about living up to his billing. And there is a difference.

Why? When it comes to playing baseball, Thome doesn’t overanalyze. Mental gymnastics are not his thing. His approach in the batter’s box is simple: Get set, grip it, rip it. His approach to being the savior of the Phillies will be the same: Trust your ability and go out and play.

“I know there are expectations,” Thome said. “Expectations are good. I have them myself. But I’ve played this game a long time, so I understand there will be good times and bad times. As a player, all you can do is play hard and hopefully be respected for that.”

Andrea, the Cleveland girl, believes Philadelphia will be the right fit for her man.

“I’m not sure Jim would have been as happy as everyone predicted he’d be had he stayed in Cleveland,” she said.

“He’s got that fire in his belly. He wants to win. Everyone was saying the Indians would be back in two or three years, but who really knows? There’s no crystal ball in Cleveland or Philadelphia. Sure, there’s a risk, but you play the odds. Philadelphia is probably going to put a better team on the field the next few years.”

“That’s exciting for Jim. It’s a fresh start.”

Andrea Pacione was a reporter covering mostly high school sports for Cleveland’s WB television affiliate when she went to Arlington, Texas, in May 1995 on an assignment that would change her life. Covering the Tribe’s season opener against the Texas Rangers, one of the players she interviewed was a friendly kid named Jim Thome, who was just blossoming as a major leaguer.

A week later, at the Indians’ home opener, Thome saw Andrea. She had been under the impression she was from Texas.

“Hey, why are you here?” the play...
er asked.

"I'm from here," the reporter said. Eventually the two became friends. They had lunch. In high school, Jim was too busy playing sports to be bothered with girlfriends. But Andrea was worth finding time for.

“At first I was a little skeptical,” said Andrea, who stopped covering sports when she began dating Jim. “I was afraid to date an athlete, having seen a little of the inside. But I trusted my gut about Jim, and my gut was right. He was a gem.”

Andrea isn’t the only one who feels that way.

“I know a lot of people around here, and I don’t know anyone who’s ever said a bad word about him,” said Matt Legaspi, a Peoria police officer and Thome’s close friend. “I hear it all the time. ‘You know Thome? He’s a great guy.’ He’s a regular guy with an exceptional talent.”

You can search high and low for Thome’s dark side, but the closest you’re likely to come is this rip job from Legaspi: “He cheats to win at quarterback. Whatever it takes to win.”

Some pro athletes are so wrapped up in their expensive cocoons that they lose touch with the real world. Not Thome. When he’s home in Peoria, he likes to ride in Legaspi’s police cruiser. He hunts deer and listens to country music. OK, the big guy likes sushi, but otherwise, he keeps things simple and lives by words he speaks frequently: No big deal.

“He’s a millionaire, but I can’t picture him as a millionaire,” Joyce Thome said. “He’s a normal kid to me. He’s never let anything go to his head.”

“There are no hidden agendas with Jim,” Andrea said. “He loves his family. He loves baseball. He loves the outdoors.”

Thome’s friends say he is a man of great feeling and empathy, that several events have deeply affected his life. The most recent was Lila’s birth. Last summer, he was struck by the sudden death of his close friend, Indians assistant trainer Jimmy Warrfield. And the previous year, the family was devastated when one of Thome’s nephews became paralyzed in an accident.

Thome has wrestled with the age-old question: Why do bad things happen? One thing I loved about Jim when I met him — and I mean this in a loving way — is that he had sort of a naiveté about the world,” Andrea said. “He tends to think that the world should be about everyone caring about each other.”

Legaspi, who was the best man at the couple’s wedding, knows Thome’s caring side well. “He is very cognizant of those around him as far as everyday life,” Legaspi said. “A lot of people who make that kind of money would be an ass just because they could. It’s almost the opposite with Jim. The more he makes, the more giving and caring he becomes.”

Thome remembers how hurt he was as an autograph-seeking kid when Cubs star Dave Kingman blew him off. It’s why he tries to never say no to a child’s autograph request. And maybe that’s why he’s so charitable. His annual event, “An Evening With Jim Thome,” has helped raise more than $700,000 for Children’s Hospital of Illinois in Peoria. He won the prestigious Roberto Clemente Award for community service last year and donated the $25,000 prize to the National Paralysis Center in Kansas in his nephew’s name.

He has set up college funds for his nieces and nephews and given athletic equipment for his old high school.

“I’ll go somewhere and someone will say, ‘Will you thank Jim for such and such?’” his father said. “I wouldn’t even have known about it. He’s picked up the tab for the umpires in a local league the last few years. Maybe that’s just found out about it.”

Legends have it that a sick kid once asked Babe Ruth to hit him a home run, and Ruth obliged.

The Babe has nothing on Thome. In the summer of 2003, his 15-year-old nephew, Brandon Thome, a promising left-handed pitcher at Limestone, suffered a spinal injury while diving into a swimming pool. Brandon, the son of Jim’s brother Randy, now has only limited use of his arms and gets around in a wheelchair.

Exactly one month after Brandon was injured, Thome, in Chicago with the Indians for a two-game series against the White Sox, visited his nephew at a Northwestern University rehabilitation facility.

Thome said his heart ached for his nephew, but Brandon’s spirit lifted him as he headed off to that night’s game.

“Uncle Jim,” Brandon said. “Hit me a home run.”

“I’ll try,” said Thome, with a wink. That night, July 18, 2001, Thome hit a home run.

Next day.

“Hey, Uncle Jim, hit me two tonight.”

“IT TRY.”

Brandon was at that game, in a wheelchair, with his parents and grandparents.

Uncle Jim hit one home run.

Then another.

As Thome circled the bases on his second home run, an ecstatic Brandon turned to his grandfather.

“Grandma, can you believe it?”

Then.

Yesterday, I’m going to ask him to hit three.”

A few seats away, right there in Comiskey Park, granddad Chuck Thome just about lost it. Out in the Indians’ bullpen, reliever Bob Wickman went to work, bargaining with fans to get the two home run balls.

The Indians returned to Cleveland after the game. Chuck and Joyce Thome drove there the next morning. Before they left, they stopped by the rehab center to see their grandson.

Brandon was sleeping. His arms lay across his chest, cradling two baseballs.

"He gave me orders,” the nurse said. “No one touches those balls.”

This time, Grandpa did lose it.

Thome’s response to this bit of heroism was typical. No big deal. It’s all about Brandon. It’s always about someone else.

Particularly his family.

"Jim has taken care of all of us,” brother Chuck said over a cup of coffee this winter. “He’s amazing on that part. He knows what it was like before. He realizes he has a gift, and he doesn’t forget the people who helped him get there. “We’re all living a dream. It’s amazing.”

Chuck paused, blowing on his hot coffee. For a second or two he didn’t say much. Maybe he was recalling the skinny kid who used to hit rocks in the driveway, the little boy who used to drink all his milk so that one day he’d be a big boy. Maybe he was thinking of the grown man who is so generous and caring off the field and so talented on it.

“Jim’s definitely a good boy,” Chuck Thome said of his little brother. “Philadelphia is getting a good man.”

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