

Samardzija sparks Irish resurgence

By Malcolm Moran

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — Long before his acrobatic and opportunistic catches made Jeff Samardzija an important part of Notre Dame's football resurgence, his positive outlook was preserved one Tuesday night at a time.

The Tuesday night dinners were born of the saddest necessity for a son who lost a mother and a father who lost a bride. Samardzija was 16 when his mother, Deborah, died from a respiratory illness at the end of his sophomore year at Valparaiso (Ind.) High School.

When his older brother Sam was at college, Jeff and his father, Sam Samardzija Sr., would go out to eat and talk about whatever needed to be said. "That was our special time," Sam Sr. says. "He had to grow up a little quicker than his friends did because of the circumstances."

His son's ability to handle the sudden glare of national attention as a key factor in Notre Dame's 4-1 start, combines a wry sense of humor, frequent smiles and an understanding of how suddenly everything can change. As the Notre Dame campus transforms into an amusement park for the arrival of No. 1 Southern California this week, Samardzija's strong sense of perspective will help him manage the inevitable surge of emotion.

"My family is real big on just making positives out of negatives," Samardzija says as he walks between Notre Dame Stadium and the library with its "Touchdown Jesus" mural, on his way to class.

"It was obviously a bad situation. But I think when there are things you can't control, you have to take something out of it," Samardzija says. "I think about her all the time. She's always in my thoughts. I kind of tried to take what I could from the situation, such as what I learned from her, everything she taught me when I was growing up."

"That's what those dinners were for. It was probably way harder on my Dad than it was on me. It was hard, but that was someone he knew from high school and grew up with and ended up marrying for many years. It was good for me just to do my part in helping him out, and he helped me out, too. You've got to move on, but you can't forget, either."

After limited involvement his first two seasons, Samardzija has become Notre Dame's leading receiver in his junior year. His 28 catches and 499 yards already have exceeded the career totals from his freshman and sophomore seasons. He never caught a touchdown pass before this year; now he has eight.

Samardzija, 6-5, 220, has added depth to a passing game weakened by an injury to senior Rhema McKnight. His emergence gives the Fighting Irish a chance to exploit a rare Trojan weakness. USC allows an average of 246.2 passing yards in its 5-0 season, ranking 83rd among 119 I-A schools.

At first, Samardzija's value to the Irish came from his versatility. He is the holder on field goal and point-after kicks. He is part of the "hands" unit for onside kickoffs. He was inserted as a deep safety on defense for one play of the victory at Washington. And in between spring practice sessions,

Samardzija has pitched for the Irish baseball team the past two seasons. As a sophomore, he had a record of 8-1 and an earned-run average of 3.89.

His most obvious value has come as Brady Quinn's most frequent target. There was a diving touchdown catch at Pittsburgh; a right-place, right-time reception off a carom for a score at Michigan; a school record-tying three touchdown catches against Michigan State; a 52-yard score at Washington; and a highlight-reel 41-yard diving one-handed grab that set up a score at Purdue.

"Things kind of come from different situations," he says. "I think right now I'm trying to take advantage of the one I'm in, and whatever happens with it happens. Just try to take it all, and just understand that as good as things get they can always get as bad, too. And you don't know when that is going to happen."

Even keel

Earlier, as he sits in an auditorium and speaks with reporters, Samardzija recognizes a reality as certain as the arrival of bone-chilling cold.

"There are a lot of people that love Notre Dame," he says, "but there a whole lot more people that love Notre Dame when you win."

He deals with the magnification of every act, each high and low, by finding a comfortable place to occupy in the middle. "I'm pretty much all right on game day," Samardzija says.

"I think the worst part is the bus ride over. Everything a few hours before the game. That's usually when I'm all worked up. But then you come to the Basilica, and you have church before a game."

Samardzija smiles at the thought of pregame emotions being interrupted by Mass.

"That usually brings you back down, a little calm," he says. "I think you guys know going to church probably isn't the most exciting, pumped-up thing in the world."

"Speak for yourself," a questioner teases.

"Maybe you're in the choir or something," Samardzija says.

His first two seasons held few hints of what was to come. Samardzija had seven catches as a freshman and 17 as a sophomore for a total of 327 yards. The first time Sam Sr. watched practice last spring, after the arrival of head coach Charlie Weis, the progress appeared to be slow and painful.

"They must have run the first play six times," says Sam Sr., who has remarried. "You were going to get it right or you were going to keep running it. I thought, 'It's going to be a long spring.'"

But through the voluntary drills of the summer, his son developed a rapport with the quarterback. Samardzija worked and waited his turn.

"No matter where you play, no matter who you are, if you go out and make plays there's going to be confidence built within the team and the coaches," he says. "And things are just going to go. I just

realized when I got my chances I had to take advantage of them. If you let things slip away, things aren't going to work out."

White Sox love

Now comes the biggest week of his athletic life. The No. 9 Irish and top-ranked Trojans enter the game with the best combined USA TODAY coaches' poll rankings since the schools were No. 1 and No. 2 in 1988, Notre Dame's last championship season. And then there are the Chicago White Sox, Samardzija's favorite team, in the American League Championship Series after the franchise's first postseason series victory since 1917.

Samardzija's allegiance can be traced to a childhood in Valparaiso, between Chicago and South Bend. More than a decade ago, the new Comiskey Park was so much easier to reach than Wrigley Field. Bo Jackson was on the South Side and the White Sox reached the 1993 American League Championship Series and a kid was hooked.

"We always considered ourselves an Illinois type," he says. "We always had Chicago news stations and stuff. I always get made fun of by the guys that are from Chicago. I try to claim it, but I always get shot down."

To the Chicago-area players, Samardzija is from the wrong side of the Skyway. Tom Zbikowski, a junior safety from suburban Arlington Heights, Ill., regards Samardzija's geographical status with a smile, and a sneer.

"He's from Valpo," Zbikowski says.

Is this any way to treat a Fighting Irish hero?

"When things go well, people are definitely going to be coming from places you didn't know existed," Samardzija says. "But I'm real good with staying tight with people that I grew up with and my good friends. So they never really had to come out of the woodwork because they've always been there for me. It makes the decisions a whole lot easier, to really know who's true and who's not true."