

CRAIG *counsell*

by dennis brown

Major-league veteran made a
career of giving back

It's a nearly perfect day in late September

at Wrigley Field as the Chicago Cubs and Milwaukee Brewers prepare for one of the final games of the 2011 baseball season. The sky is cloudless, the temperature is 72 degrees and the Brewers are three games away from clinching the National League Central Division title.

Standing outside the batting cage prior to the game is Craig Counsell, a 15-year veteran of the big leagues and 1992 Notre Dame graduate. He's in a batting practice group with two or three other Brewer bench players, taking five or six swings, stepping out for the others, then stepping back in for another round. While waiting, he stands alone, quietly, a steely stare on his face. In his first round of BP he rolls a few pitches into the ground and hits a couple of flares, but he's just taking easy swings, and in subsequent rounds he begins to stroke line drives to all fields.

Later in the day, as was the case throughout the year, Counsell came off the bench to pinch hit. He ripped a shot much like those in BP, but it was caught for an out. It was that kind of year for Counsell, at least at the plate. As always, however, he excelled defensively at three positions and helped the Brewers reach the National League Championship Series against the St. Louis Cardinals. It was yet another memorable ride for a player and man who is universally respected for what he's done on and off the field.

Counsell has spent most of his 41 years on baseball fields—mostly in the majors, but also in the minors, youth ball and Notre Dame's old Jake Kline Field just north of the Joyce Center where the Jordan Hall of Science now stands. Craig's dad, John, was an Irish baseball player and coach in the 1960s and '70s. He later served as the director of community relations for the Brewers, and Craig often accompanied him to work at County Stadium in Milwaukee.

"I tagged along to work with my dad and basically grew up at the stadium," Counsell says. "I've lived the baseball life; that's really what I've done my whole life."

When it came time to make a college decision, Notre Dame always was at the top of Counsell's list, but he also considered Duke, Indiana University and the University of Wisconsin. ➔



"I looked around, but I'd gone to football games at Notre Dame and it was my first choice," he says.

"Luckily, the baseball program had just turned around when I was deciding to go there. The timing was good. If it had been a couple of years earlier, I don't know that it would have been the right place for me to go to school."

Pat Murphy, a young, hard-charging, demanding coach, had taken over the Notre Dame baseball program in the late 1980s and recruited Counsell at the urging of former Irish sports information director Roger Valdiserri. A middle infielder, Counsell was as fundamentally sound as any player could be, but he wasn't then—and, really, still isn't now—a classic physical specimen. Nonetheless, Murphy offered him a partial scholarship—all of \$750 a year.

"From day one, Craig's commitment to his game and to his studies was evident," says Murphy, who remains close to Counsell.

"He is as good of an example of a student-athlete as there is. He started all four years but it wasn't until his junior year that he

PICTURED ABOVE LEFT Craig at bat
PICTURED ABOVE RIGHT Making a throw at a Brewers game in Milwaukee
PICTURED OPPOSITE Craig fielding at Notre Dame

really came into his own. He led our teams with his passion and obvious desire to play winning baseball. He didn't say much, but his style of play made you take notice. He did all of the little things that championship players do."

"My first year was Pat's second year (at Notre Dame)," Counsell remembers.

"He was a huge influence on me, for sure. He was tough, he was young, he brought great energy, and he demanded a lot of you."

Counsell capped his Notre Dame career with an outstanding senior season. In leading the Irish to within one game of the College World Series, he hit .339 with 63 RBIs, 12 home runs (double what he had hit in his three previous years combined) and 13 stolen bases. He was selected MVP on an immensely talented team that included 14 eventual professional baseball draft picks.

An 11th round draft pick of the Colorado Rockies in the spring of 1992, Counsell made



it to the big league club for a few games three years later, then stuck for good in 1997. He was traded midway through that season to Florida, where he hit .299 in helping the Marlins reach the playoffs. In the World Series against Cleveland, he was a primary contributor in a dramatic Game Seven, driving in the tying run with a sacrifice fly in the ninth, and then scoring the winning run in the 11th inning.

Counsell was traded to the Dodgers in 1999 and then signed with the Arizona Diamondbacks in 2000. A year later, after hitting .275, he was back in the playoffs, where he was selected MVP of the National League Championship Series. In the World Series, he again was part of a winning Game Seven rally when he was hit by a pitch by New York's Mariano Rivera in the bottom of the ninth just before Luis Gonzalez came through with a walk-off single to secure the title.

"Both World Series are highlights," Counsell says.

"When you're part of a team that does that, it's a memory that lasts a lifetime. It's what you want to do as a baseball player, to play in games that everyone dreams of being a part of. I played in two Game Sevens in the World Series; those are the best baseball games you can be a part of. But neither is more special than the other. I have great memories from both."

Counsell spent two more years in Arizona, played the 2004 season in Milwaukee, went back to the Diamondbacks in 2005 and '06, and has been with his hometown team again for the past five years. His ability to play shortstop, second and third, a consistent bat (.255 career average), his work ethic and his veteran leadership have made him one of

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the best and most admired professional athletes to come from Notre Dame.

"I've had the opportunity to talk to many of his fellow big leaguers," Murphy says, "and to a man they all say he plays the game the right way, he's a winning ballplayer and he's a great teammate. It's no accident his teams find ways to win championships."

"Coaches often get credited with developing players. In this case, Craig developed me. I truly feel honored to have been part of his career, but feel even more blessed that we are close friends."

"I've been lucky," says Counsell in his typically modest way. "I was fortunate to have quite a bit of success early, especially a couple of World Series. I'm 41 now and still playing major league baseball. I'm at the point now where I'm just enjoying it."

Counsell will decide in the winter whether this past season was his last.

"When you're getting toward the end, of course you think about it," he said. "I mean, as an athlete, it doesn't last forever, but you keeping playing until they tell you no. That's kind of how I've always treated it. When you get to my age, you kind of know when they're going to say no, and there are voices inside of you that are saying no, too."

Whenever he retires, Counsell plans to remain in the game—perhaps coaching, perhaps in the front office. He also will continue to contribute in a variety of ways

to causes that matter to him and his wife, Michelle.

The father of four children, Counsell has served as an ambassador for the Fatherhood Initiative, a Milwaukee project that helps reinforce the role of dads in kids' lives, and he and Michelle have recently begun supporting financially and with personal



appearances initiatives such as the Urban Ecology Center in Milwaukee, the Midwest Athletes Against Cancer Fund, the Boys & Girls Clubs, and the annual Drive for Charity.

They also contributed to the renovation of the baseball locker room at Notre Dame (named in Murphy's honor) and have supported the construction of a youth baseball field near Phoenix and several youth baseball organizations in the Milwaukee area. Getting Counsell to talk about his charitable work is a little like getting him to chase a bad pitch—he generally just won't do it.

"I try to take a low profile with these things," he said. "That's my personality."

He does open up, a little, when discussing the contributions to youth baseball.

"Baseball in Milwaukee has been important to me; just the continuation and development of the sport," he says.

"Baseball isn't on the radar for kids as much anymore, so I try to quietly make sure kids get a chance to play. I have a good sense of what baseball means to the city of Milwaukee. I feel like I can be a steward for the game in the city. That's a big reason why I wanted to play there."

Counsell has twice won the Brewers' Good Guy Award and was selected in 2006 as winner of the Heart and Hustle Award with the Diamondbacks. But there was a point in Game Three of the National League Divisional Series between the Brewers and Diamondbacks—the two organizations for which Counsell has played the most—that best exemplifies just how much he is appreciated as a player and person.

As he came to the plate and was announced as a pinch-hitter for Milwaukee in the eighth inning, many fans rose to their feet and gave him a long and warm standing ovation. The television announcers noted the moment, saying, "That applause you're hearing is for Craig Counsell ... what a nice welcome. He's one of the good guys in the game, one of those people you pull for."

The game was in Arizona and the heartfelt applause came from the opposing team's fans. ■