

M.I.T. Grad Has Specialty in Sinker

By LEE JENKINS

SAN DIEGO, May 1 — In the home clubhouse at Petco Park, Jason Szuminski is no rocket scientist, no M.I.T. graduate, no first lieutenant in the Air Force.

He's just Zoo.

Teammates don't know much about his degree in aerospace engineering or about his part-time job helping the Air Force acquire communications satellites or about his off-season plans to conduct research at Edwards Air Force Base in the Mojave Desert.

They just know about Szuminski's sinker.

"He's one of the guys — only smarter than us," San Diego Padres outfielder Jay Payton said. "We don't care if he's building spaceships or whatever."

Szuminski does not actually build spaceships, but he is the Padres' resident rocket scientist, the pride of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and an Air Force reservist this military city can support.

When Szuminski hears himself referred to as Rocket Man or Egghead or Brain Trust, he rolls his eyes and shakes his head. He is proud of his off-field accomplishments and slightly embarrassed by all the attention he receives because of them.

"I'm not into this to be a novelty act," Szuminski said. "A lot of guys

have something other than baseball they do. I'm into science. It's really some pretty neat stuff."

His baseball background is almost as neat. The 6-foot-5, 221-pound Szuminski, who was born in San Diego, could not get a baseball scholarship offer from a major college, but he landed an R.O.T.C. scholarship to M.I.T., which had produced 57 Nobel Prize winners but no major league baseball players. Szuminski went 10-11 with the Division III Engineers and somehow persuaded the Chicago Cubs to draft him in the 27th round of the 2000 draft.

Padres General Manager Kevin Towers, who has often plucked major league players from the Rule 5 draft, traded for Szuminski after the Kansas City Royals made him a Rule 5 draftee last year. Not only is the 25-year-old Szuminski the first M.I.T. graduate to play major league baseball, but he is also considered the first member of the armed services to play in the majors since Vietnam. During military day at Petco Park, Szuminski asked to be introduced as Lt. Jason Szuminski.

"I've been a long shot for a long time," he said. "Sometimes I do sit here and just look around. I don't know if I've realized yet where I am."

Like the N.B.A.'s David Robinson (Navy) and the N.F.L.'s Chad Hen-

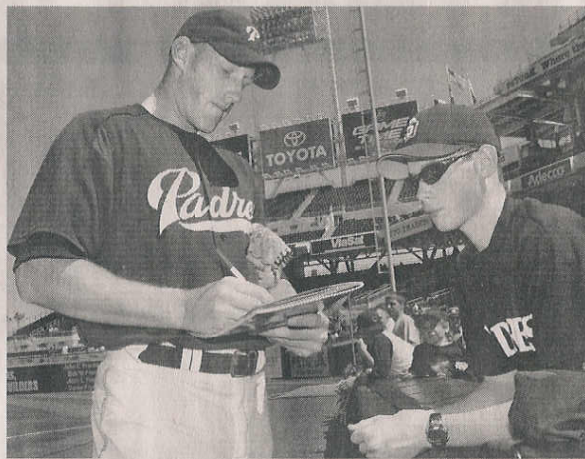
nings (Air Force), Szuminski was given an official leave to pursue his baseball career, but he had to donate his minor league salary to charity. After making the Padres' roster out of spring training, he switched to the Reserves so he could keep the \$300,000 he is set to earn this season.

For a Rule 5 draftee, Szuminski has been treated like a first-round draft choice. The M.I.T. alumni Web site has a page dedicated to him, and Sports Illustrated ran a weekly "Szuminskimeter" in spring training to track his bid to make the Padres. Ever since, he has been hounded by interview requests, and he takes particular pleasure in evaluating each question he is asked. "A lot of them are the same," Szuminski said.

Szuminski maintains that graduating from M.I.T. was his greatest achievement, but a close second might be retiring Barry Bonds, which he did at Petco Park on a soft fly ball to left field.

Other than that brief brush with greatness, Szuminski has discovered that pitching in the major leagues is tougher than thermodynamics. He has a 9.45 earned run average in five games this season and is the last man in the Padres' bullpen, a long way from closer Trevor Hoffman.

Still, Szuminski demonstrates his value in other, lower-profile ways. "We have a lot of random conversa-



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"I don't know if I've realized yet where I am," the M.I.T. graduate Jason Szuminski says of making the Padres as a reliever.

tions in the bullpen," relief pitcher Scott Linebrink said. "We'll always be trying to figure something out and he usually has the answer."

Szuminski might be able to win an intrasquad game of Trivial Pursuit, but he insists that his field of knowledge does not help him at all on the diamond. It's not as though he comes up with mathematical equations to calculate the flight of a slider before he throws it. "People always ask that," he said.

As he scanned the Padres' glistening new clubhouse, filled with flat-screen televisions and books with colorful pictures, Szuminski let his mind wander to the off-season, when his surroundings will change drastically. While his teammates may be vacationing in Cancun, he will be at a lab in the Southern California desert, performing advanced research on new technologies.

"It'll be neat," he said. "I'll like to get back to using my mind."