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Nationals' Sean Doolittle, Eireann Dolan may be baseball's most 'woke' couple

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WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Sean Doolittle and Eireann Dolan almost wore nearly identical shoes to a photo shoot last week. Most major league players don't argue with their wife over who gets to wear Birkenstocks that day. Most major league players wouldn't have their local paper requesting a photo shoot to accompany a story about their work with Syrian refugees or LGBT pride night or an op-ed they wrote about veterans' issues. Doolittle and Dolan are not most major league couples.

In a sport with a conservative culture defined by tradition and a near-dogmatic acceptance of the social status quo, they have been unafraid to be different, while determined not to be different for different's sake.

Their Twitter banter fostered hordes of loving fans during Doolittle's time in Oakland. Their public stances on political and social issues stood out because so many of Doolittle's colleagues won't go there. Their service in that community and others gave their online personalities real-life clout.

Within weeks of the deal that brought Doolittle, a Shawnee High School graduate, to Washington last summer, he and Dolan found a community as receptive to their outspoken online presence as it was to their constant quipping back and forth.

"That was the biggest fear I had with being traded anywhere," Dolan said. "I was like, I'm never going to find a fan base that appreciates my jokes about Sean as much as Oakland did. But the Nationals fans immediately took to both of our styles."

That style includes Dolan's constant jokes about Doolittle's workout routines with five-pound dumbbells, or Doolittle's unabashed nerd-outs over "Star Wars" (his Twitter handle is Obi-Sean Kenobi, and yes, his profile photo is him giving Yoda a piggyback ride). For Dolan, a writer and graduate student studying religion at Fordham University, that style also includes clear support for the Black Lives Matter movement, increased gun control and other political issues.

Doolittle is less public about his opinions, but he does feel responsibility to speak up when he can. For weeks when he arrived in Washington, he wanted to lay low, stay away from anything polarizing, just establish himself. But when violence erupted at a white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, the University of Virginia alumnus felt he had to say something. He

knows his time as a major leaguer will be brief, and that the platform it gives him won't last, either.

He chooses his battles carefully. When something happens that frustrates him, Doolittle tries to wait and let emerging details prove themselves as facts first. If he still feels moved to tweet, he types out his drafts and has Dolan read them. Sometimes he steps away from them for a while and revisits them before sending. Sometimes he doesn't send them at all.

Doolittle takes care because major league clubhouses have long been considered bastions of social and political conservatism. If they are changing, if the mindset of a younger generation is trending more toward the socially active habits of their peers in the NBA and NFL, no one will speak up to say so. If there is a prevailing ideology in baseball clubhouses, it is to keep one's ideology to himself. Don't ask, don't tell, and don't mess up the clubhouse vibe.

"I used to care a lot about what other people thought, like teammates," Doolittle said. "But then, I feel like in this atmosphere and in general, if people can tell that you're being genuine, if this is something you really care about, if this is something you know a lot about, people will respect that."

When asked about the fact that some of his teammates might not think the same way he does about political or social issues and activism, Doolittle chuckled at the understatement. But he said the big issues that never seem to leave the spotlight in the real world rarely come up in the baseball bubble.

"It's not like we're shagging batting practice talking about immigration policy or what just happened with the FBI director," Doolittle said. "Here, it's a different environment, I think."

Because of that environment, and because of the sensitivity of Major League Baseball teams to alienating any of their fans, Doolittle and Dolan have been discerning in choosing off-field causes, not just on social media but also in terms of activism. Doolittle and Dolan are from military families. Dolan's mother came out to her when Dolan was in high school. They have taken on causes to which they have personal connections, such as veterans' issues or LGBT rights and inclusion.

Early in Doolittle's career, they became dedicated supporters of Operation Finally Home, which builds houses for wounded veterans and their families. Doolittle and Dolan started a registry to help furnish two such houses in northern California, promising signed A's gear to those who donated. Within weeks, fans had filled every cabinet and drawer with the necessities for the recipients.

"I think that was the first time we realized we had the ability to move the needle on something," Dolan said.

When the Athletics received backlash for scheduling an LGBT Pride Night in the spring of 2015, Doolittle and Dolan raised enough money to buy 900 tickets, tickets they donated to local LGBT youth groups. They organized a Thanksgiving meal for Syrian refugees in Chicago, one at which the mayor of Chicago and his aldermen served as greeters and waiters.

“I know a lot of athletes might not want to promote a lot of causes because sometimes it seems a little self-indulgent,” Dolan said. “It’s like, why don’t you just pay for it?”

But she and Doolittle, with whom she eloped last October, prioritize engagement and mobilizing communities for causes, not just writing checks. They also prioritize understanding their causes. When they wrote an op-ed for Sports Illustrated about the need to fund mental health resources for discharged veterans, they took 10 briefings on the subject, from groups including the Brookings Institution, the Human Rights Campaign and the Cato Institute. They have yet to choose an initiative in Washington, though they have been looking and researching a few ideas, unwilling to just leap without looking.

“I think people can see the amount of work Eireann and I put into it, the amount of time we spend making sure we do it responsibly, that we’re not just being opportunistic, that we’re doing it in a way that other people have a chance to get involved so we’re not just, like, yelling into the void and retweeting things,” Doolittle said. “. . . I’m not just an athlete doing something for likes on social media.”

But those likes come anyway. Doolittle has more than 76,000 followers on Twitter. Dolan has more than 33,000. Fans request to take pictures with them. One young fan who found them last week asked if they would adopt her. Some of their tweets are directed at causes. Many of them are directed at each other.

“It just humanizes us, and it’s a sport that really doesn’t lend itself well to humanizing the labor,” Dolan said. “There’s no margin for error. At a certain point if you can’t do it, it doesn’t matter how much your wife makes fun of you on Twitter, or what your dog looks like. Fans are not going to have a lot of patience.”

Fittingly, Doolittle and Dolan met on Twitter, a story they recalled fondly last week on the patio behind the Nationals’ complex. Dolan was friends with Doolittle’s teammate Brandon McCarthy. Doolittle would reply to their tweets now and then, not thinking much of it. After weeks of public replies, Dolan sent him a puzzling message, “Why are you funny?”

“I was mad he was funny, because I don’t like when people are good at two different things,” Dolan said. “You should be good at baseball or you should be good at being funny online. He was both, and I was like, ‘Oh, I don’t care for this at all. You need to pick a side.’”

Because he wouldn’t pick just baseball, they ended up on the same side in the end.