



KING GEORGE



BY JOEL POILEY

COURTESY OF THE HOUSTON ASTROS (9)



WHETHER IT'S A NASTY
CURVEBALL OR
A SPEECH DISORDER,
NOTHING CAN
STOP GEORGE SPRINGER.

AS GEORGE SPRINGER ANSWERED QUESTIONS in front of the massive media crowd after winning last year's World Series Most Valuable Player award, it was impossible to tell he ever had a stuttering problem. Confident and self-assured, the Houston Astros center fielder easily answered the questions, showing no effects of the speech problem he has had his whole life. But it wasn't always this way. When he was young, stuttering made interacting with people difficult and he became isolated and alone, hardly speaking at all in elementary and middle school. He said he was bullied and made fun of by other kids, who teased him when he had trouble speaking. Sometimes they called him stupid, which made him speak even less so he wouldn't get picked on.

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"It was extremely isolating," Springer says. "It's the worst feeling you can have knowing whatever you have to say you can't say it. I didn't speak in class. I didn't want to participate. But now I know stuttering is nothing to be ashamed of."

DON'T HOLD BACK

Springer also realizes the impact he has on young people who stutter, and he became the national spokesperson for Camp SAY (The Stuttering Association for the Young) in 2014. Based in Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains, the camp is for young people ages 8-18. It includes traditional camp activities such as water sports, ropes courses, and nature and wilderness activities. In addition, it offers activities that help young people who stutter gain confidence and learn to communicate.

More than 70 million people worldwide stutter, including 5 percent of all young children and about one in every 100 adults. For the past three years, Springer has hosted an annual bowling benefit in Houston, with the money raised going to Camp SAY scholarships for families in need.

"I totally embrace my stutter – it makes me who I am," Springer says. "Some people have blue eyes, some have blonde hair and some people stutter. I've never let it hold me back, and with Camp SAY I want to help kids who stutter build the confidence they need to pursue their own dreams. We know what we want to say; it just takes us a little bit longer. But what we have to say is worth the wait."

WORLD SERIES HERO

When Springer started playing professional baseball, he had to overcome a different kind of struggle. Like many young players, Springer went through a learning curve when he was brought to the major leagues in 2014. He hit a lot of home runs, but he also struck out a lot.

"This is a game of failure," Springer says, "and you have to be able to handle failure to keep going and play through the tough times and learn from them to be successful."

The same thing happened to Springer in the playoffs last year, when he batted just .115 (3 for 26) without an extra-base hit or RBI (run batted in) in seven games against the Yankees in the American League Championship Series. He followed that by striking out all four times he batted in the first World Series game against the Dodgers.

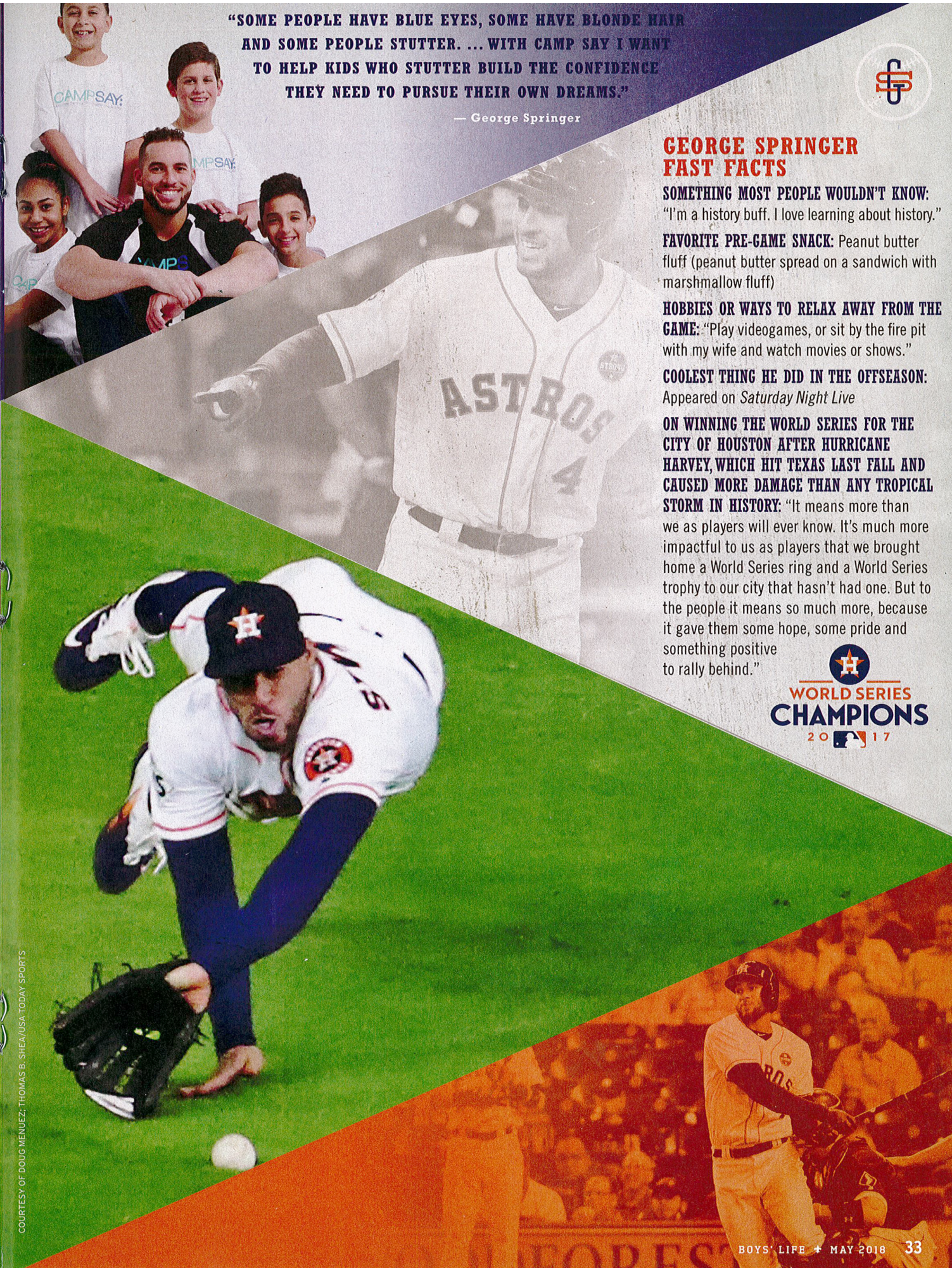
He looked lost at the plate facing Los Angeles Dodgers ace left-hander Clayton Kershaw. But he kept his sense of humor, even singing, "I believe I can hit," a play on the song "I Believe I Can Fly," during batting practice before the second game.

Astros manager A.J. Hinch firmly stood behind him, leaving him in the leadoff spot in the batting order.

Good move. Springer went 11 for 25 the rest of the way to earn the Series MVP award.

Boom: Another obstacle overcome.

"It was a dream come true," Springer says. "When you're going through those tough times, you just have to tell yourself to have fun and that it really is just a game, even in the World Series." ♣



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— George Springer



GEORGE SPRINGER FAST FACTS

SOMETHING MOST PEOPLE WOULDN'T KNOW: "I'm a history buff. I love learning about history."

FAVORITE PRE-GAME SNACK: Peanut butter fluff (peanut butter spread on a sandwich with marshmallow fluff)

HOBBIES OR WAYS TO RELAX AWAY FROM THE GAME: "Play videogames, or sit by the fire pit with my wife and watch movies or shows."

COOLEST THING HE DID IN THE OFFSEASON: Appeared on *Saturday Night Live*

ON WINNING THE WORLD SERIES FOR THE CITY OF HOUSTON AFTER HURRICANE HARVEY, WHICH HIT TEXAS LAST FALL AND CAUSED MORE DAMAGE THAN ANY TROPICAL STORM IN HISTORY: "It means more than we as players will ever know. It's much more impactful to us as players that we brought home a World Series ring and a World Series trophy to our city that hasn't had one. But to the people it means so much more, because it gave them some hope, some pride and something positive to rally behind."



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