

## Fatherhood comes first for Seahawks' Jurevicius

By Greg Johns

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CHENEY, Wash. -- When Joe Jurevicius signed a free-agent contract with the Seahawks last March, he considered the team's chances of winning, the money, the coaching staff, the offensive philosophy. One added bonus that wasn't officially entered in the contract -- babysitting in-laws and family support.

For the former Tampa Bay wide receiver, playing in Seattle brings the benefit of a return home for his wife, Meagan (Dewey) Jurevicius, a former middle-distance running star at Mercer Island High in the 1980s.

Jurevicius insists that really wasn't a deal-maker in his decision to sign with the Seahawks after four years with the New York Giants and three with Tampa Bay. But make no mistake. Family is foremost for the two-time Super Bowl veteran.

Jurevicius made national headlines in January of 2003 when he helped the Buccaneers win Super Bowl XXXVII while his newborn son, Michael, was battling for his life in a Tampa hospital. Michael died two months later, never able to overcome fetal sialidosis, a degenerative cell disease that limited his lung development.

Since then, the couple has had their second child, Caroline, who will soon celebrate her first birthday. For Jurevicius, fatherhood far outweighs anything else he has done in life.

"Children, for me, are what make my world go around," Jurevicius said. "It's not football, it's family. It's my kids. That was a tough pill to swallow (when Michael died). So I think the least we could do is use the recognition I have in professional football to help others."

With that in mind, Meagan Jurevicius was in Washington, D.C., last week speaking at a youth convention for the March of Dimes. It is a charity near and dear the couple's hearts.

"I won't talk about the logistics of what happened to our son. But yeah, the March of Dimes is important," he said. "You don't realize how many people are going through traumatic experiences, whether it's a premature birth or a son or daughter who is sick and could possibly die like ours did.

"At that time you feel like you're the only family or couple that is going through it, but

you eventually realize that in every city, in every state, somebody is going through it."

While Jurevicius sweats through two-a-day practices in Cheney, Meagan is keeping just as busy.

"She's got her hands full," said Joe. "She's getting the new house settled, she's got to deal with me, she's got our daughter and she's also working to keep our son's name alive with the March of Dimes and everything it stands for.

"Meagan is happy that we're in Seattle, but it's rough right now for all of us while we're in camp. Any (player) with a wife and kids, you're not with them for a month," he said. "My daughter is about to turn a year old and here I am stuck with 80-some guys that I'm sick of seeing. So I'm looking forward to the end of camp. I think all of us would say that. But we still have some work to do here. We'll get it done and I've got the rest of the year to see my family."

Jurevicius figures to be a central figure in the Seahawks' offense this year. At 6-foot-5, he's the big, sure-handed target Matt Hasselbeck hasn't had in recent years. In the first week of camp, he has caught everything thrown his way, including a couple tough balls over the middle on Friday.

"He's a very, very good receiver," coach Mike Holmgren said. "He has real strengths in certain areas and we're going to try and exploit those. He has good hands. The ball doesn't hit the ground with him."

Though slowed by injuries the past two years, the former Penn State standout could be exactly what the doctor ordered for a team searching for more consistency in the receiving corps. He played in Super Bowl XXXV with the Giants in 2001 and caught four passes for 78 yards in Super Bowl XXXVII with the Bucs in '03.

"I've been fortunate to play in two Super Bowls in three years," he said. "I've seen the ups and downs. I guess, unfortunately or fortunately, I know how bad it feels to go to the Super Bowl and lose. I'd rather not go to the playoffs if I'm going to lose in the Super Bowl. That's how bad it felt. On the other hand, I saw the confetti flying for us in Super Bowl XXXVII. So I've been fortunate. I've won championships in high school, college and the professional level."

And, yet, this is a man whose life experiences have provided perspective. He knows the biggest wins are achieved off the field.

"When Meagan spoke at the youth conference last week, she said there wasn't a dry

eye in the place," Jurevicius said. "These kids want to hear about real-life experiences, not professors speaking out of a text book."

So whether it's March of Dimes or Easter Seals or any charity to help the prevention of birth defects and lower the infant mortality rate, the Jurevicius family will press on.

"I think it's a tribute (to Michael)," Jurevicius said. "The problems won't cease or stop, but I think in the near future we can put a dent in it. You have to start somewhere. If you can save one child, it's all worth it."

This is the kind of stuff Jurevicius doesn't really want to talk about in the middle of training camp. It's football time for him. Time to meet new teammates, learn new plays, form new bonds that will carry him through the rigors of the coming season.

But Joe Jurevicius is more than a football player.

He's a father.

And nothing can beat that.