

SPORTS // SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS

Giants' new exec Farhan Zaidi has it all: high IQ, humor, kindness

Susan Slusser

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Farhan Zaidi (right) and brother Jaffer, who had been diagnosed with cancer, played their usual spring training match.

Photo: Courtesy of Farhan Zaidi, 2005

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If anyone is built to move from the A's and Dodgers to take over their shared arch-nemesis, it's the cheery, unpretentious Farhan Zaidi, who uses comedy to lighten even the heaviest of situations, including his brother's battle with cancer three years ago.

That sense of humor should come in handy in Zaidi's new role with the underperforming Giants. Zaidi, who turns 42 Sunday, was introduced Wednesday as the team's president of baseball operations, and those who know him well believe he's a great fit.

"It's a good time for the Giants to bring in a guy like Farhan," said UC Berkeley economics professor Ted Miguel, who attended MIT with Zaidi and worked with him when Zaidi was getting his doctorate at Cal. "If anyone can figure things out there, it's him. He's in a really serious position and he's a very serious executive — but he doesn't take himself too seriously."

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When Zaidi's younger brother, Jaffer, was diagnosed with a form of lymphoma three years ago, Zaidi helped alleviate the anxiety of the ordeal with jokes — a welcome respite, Jaffer Zaidi is quick to say.

The brothers play tennis in Arizona every year during spring training, but during the annual visit in 2015, Jaffer was diagnosed. The match was still on, though, and as cutthroat as ever.

"We have a typical older/younger brother dynamic where he beats me in every sport," Jaffer said. "He was winning and just about to finish it out when he thought, 'This is such a great moment, I treasure these times with Jaff so much, and I don't know when we're going to have another moment like this. I should let it go on longer. ... Nah.'"



Jaffer and Farhan Zaidi, along with their father, Sadiq (right), attended a Dodgers game at Wrigley Field last year.

Photo: Courtesy Jaffer Zaidi, 2017

“He aced it and used it later for some levity at the right time, ‘I thought about doing that but decided to win instead.’ And it did make me laugh. He didn’t even think, ‘Oh, he just got diagnosed with cancer, I should let him win.’”

Zaidi had barely started his new job as the Dodgers’ general manager when Jaffer was diagnosed, but he traveled to the East Coast for many of his brother’s treatments, which lasted four months.

“Farhan has always been my best friend and the person I turn to for everything I need,” said Jaffer, 38. “Here he was just at the beginning of this meaningful next part of his career. I had anxiety about what that might mean for his career if he took off too much time, and I told him I didn’t think I needed him to be here, but Andrew Friedman and the Dodgers were phenomenal and allowed him to come to New York as much as he wanted.

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“Farhan was by my side so much of the time — there were so many nights he sat in a chair next to my bed and I’d tell him to go get some sleep, but he would just stay there. We went through it together.”

Farhan Zaidi recalled his brother arriving at Dodger Stadium after completing his treatment that August and looking skeletal — but on the mend.

“It was a very emotional time,” Zaidi said. “There were a couple of times we thought we would lose Jaff because of the intensity of the treatment; he had to be hospitalized because the chemo took him right to the edge.”

Jaffer Zaidi, a longtime Google executive who is a director with the company’s Global Development Business Group in New York, is in remission. He’s thrilled that his brother is back in the Bay Area, but there is one characterization of Farhan that bugs him: the idea that Zaidi is all analytics, all the time.

“I think it’s easy to pigeonhole his approach to baseball through that lens, but Farhan always views things through a much broader viewpoint,” Jaffer said. “Look at the positive relationships he has in baseball with managers and players, everyone. He always finds a way to get along and involve everyone.”



Los Angeles Dodgers GM Farhan Zaidi, center, speaks to media at the baseball general managers' meetings as the Los Angeles Dodgers' GM on Nov. 11, 2015, in Boca Raton, Fla.

Photo: Wilfredo Lee / AP

A's general manager David Forst also bristles at the analytics-only tag, saying, "That's not fair. Farhan's not that guy. He's fun to be around. He's a people person. If he's a nerd, he will own it and have fun with it. We'd be in the draft room, and he'd talk about tools, and people will get on him and say, 'You're the stat guy. You don't talk about tools.' He knows the game."

Another of Zaidi's Cal mentors, behavioral economics professor Stefano DellaVigna, pointed to Zaidi's ability to work with others, saying, "Farhan has an incredible IQ, and instead of intimidating other people — some people with high IQs like to crush other people — he uses it to have fun and make sure everyone else on the team is having fun. He's just a spectacular human being, and he has the self-confidence to admit when he's made a mistake."

DellaVigna said that Zaidi has become an inspiration of sorts for his 8-year-old son, Lucas. Forst said the same is true of his 8-year-old son, Judah, who's a big fan of Zaidi because he's allowed to play video games at Zaidi's place.

"Farhan's great w
president of base

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the Giants now. Billy said, 'Yeah, we're going to root for Farhan wherever he is.' ”

DellaVigna was wowed when Zaidi produced three standout papers in three years at Cal, including one that DellaVigna said is still among the best he's seen about the tendency to overvalue small probabilities (such as the fear of airplanes crashing).

Zaidi used his interest in sports to determine whether recent performances led to overvaluing sports trading cards, but he dug deeper than the obvious. He tracked the value of Tom Brady cards on eBay pre- and post-Super Bowl wins — and he also looked at how the championships impacted the bidding on boxes of cards, each of which had a one-in-60 chance of containing a Brady card.

“He wanted to see if people overweighed the probability — and they do, big-time,” DellaVigna said. “The price went up way too much. He connected the dots, he followed where they led and he executed it beautifully.

“I always say about students: It's hard to have all the skills. You need to be creative, organized, precise and able to communicate. It's rare to have all of those components — Farhan has it all, and he's got such enthusiasm and he takes feedback so well. He could have been a great academic.”

Miguel had a similar reaction when Zaidi told him he was leaving to take a job with the A's: “What are you talking about?”

“I thought he was poised to be a star academic,” Miguel said. “There are obviously doctoral students in economics who move to the private sector — finance, banking — but taking the analytic tools we use and applying them to sports is unusual. We saw it as a really risky move. But he was clearly one of the strongest students here and also very skilled with people, with very high emotional intelligence. It's been fun to watch his rise.”

Zaidi finished his doctorate while working for the A's, and three years ago he gave a commencement address to 400 Cal economics graduates, a typically self-deprecating speech, according to DellaVigna. “He said, ‘I barely got my degree! It took me 10 years!’” DellaVigna said.

While behavioral economics is an unusual specialty among baseball execs, it syncs up well with the sport. That might be driving

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how to spend owners' money. Even in day-to-day operations, the natural human inclination to overemphasize small probabilities or underestimate large probabilities can be exploited.

“We don't internalize probability correctly,” Zaidi said. “It affects in-game strategy in baseball a lot — like not using a backup catcher because he might get hurt. We overestimate the chance of things happening and it impacts decision-making.”

Jaffer Zaidi said he sometimes finds it hard to wrap his mind around his brother's success, considering his decidedly non-traditional baseball path, growing up the child of Pakistani immigrants in Canada and the Philippines. Then he remembers their shared obsession with sports and Farhan's ability to exploit even the tiniest weakness, whether in the fantasy league he started in 1992, while playing Wiffle ball with wads of newspapers (he quickly developed a breaking pitch) or even in pickup basketball games in the driveway, where his left-handed hook layup was all but indefensible.

“Sometime it feels inevitable, because Farhan is the hardest worker I know and he always seems to get the end result he's looking for when he puts his mind to it,” Jaffer said. “It makes sense: Bottom line, he's applying what knowledge he's gained over a long time; it just happens to be in a very specialized field that he's passionate about. That feels right.”

Susan Slusser is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: sslusser@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@susanslusser](https://twitter.com/susanslusser)

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