



Business Desk: 494-4066

Edited by Sonny Marks

# Joe extraordinaire

Lake Arthur farm dweller up for National Entrepreneur of the Year award

BY SONNY MARKS  
AMERICAN PRESS

Joe Stough of Syntex Management Systems is in Europe. This week, he meets with British Petroleum, Shell and ExxonMobil. Next week, he meets with Schlumberger.

Then he's home to Lake Arthur.

Stough (rhymes with now) is founder, president and CEO of Syntex, a Houston-based software company that had more than \$7 million in revenues last year. The company has grown more than 50 percent each of the last three years in a down economy.

When he's home on the farm in Lake Arthur, he connects with his office via T1 high-speed Internet access.

Ernst & Young recently named Stough a regional Entrepreneur of the Year in the technology/information technology sector. Houston winners were named in seven sectors.

Syntex creates computer software to make companies more efficient. Among its clients are Citgo, Compaq Computer, Continental Airlines, PPG, Reynolds Metals and Whataburger.

Stough, 35, started Syntex eight years ago. He began it after he tried to load baseball statistics into personal digital assistants for coaches to use during games.

## Baseball traveler

He grew up in Lake Charles. His father, Allen Stough, was a systems analyst for Conoco.

"We have a camp at Bundick Lake near DeRidder, and we used to go fishing there just about every weekend. My dad would take his work pager with him," Stough said.

"In the middle of fishing, he'd get paged. We'd get in the truck, go in and he'd work on the computer for two or three hours. I'd sit in the computer room while he was working. Then we'd go back fishing.

"I guess it just gave me a comfort level with computers."

Joe Stough went to Barbe High in the early 1980s, but never played varsity baseball for the Bucs. Conoco transferred his father to Lafayette before Joe's senior year, so he graduated from Comeaux High. He played infield for the Spartans as a senior.

Stough walked on to the USL baseball team in 1985 but never saw any action.

"I was never going to smell the field," he said.

He transferred to Eastern Oklahoma State College to play ball, then to Lassen Community College in Susanville, Calif. He was one of nine Louisiana players to travel to Northern California with former USL pitching coach Steve Abney, whom Lassen hired as head coach.

Stough was both player and statistician for the Lassen Cougars. He took the score book home after games, typed the stats and faxed them to the newspaper before he met his teammates at the keg parties.

Soon, Stough designed software to keep the stats.

He became the team tutor on the road trips. He did it so frequently that the athletic department eventually paid him.

After two years at Lassen, he transferred to the University of California, Santa Barbara. Midway through his first season for the Gauchos, he quit the team because an important class conflicted with practice.



SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN PRESS  
Joe Stough accepted his award last month in Houston.

He stayed in school there, got his bachelor's in operations research, then remained at UCSB for his master's in statistics. Stough created software that the university housing department used to manage roommate selection for nine years.

PricewaterhouseCoopers hired him as a trainee in its management consulting division. During his training in Tampa, Fla., he thought about designing hand-helds for baseball coaches.

## Ahead of curve

The idea sprang from his playing days at Lassen. Pitchers in the dugout charted the location and speed of pitches, fielders' positioning and multiple other items. It grated on Stough that once the information was collected, coaches had to pore through stacks of folders to glean any information.

"It was an inefficient way to use that data," he said. "There was some rich knowledge in there they weren't getting to. That bugged me for years."

He wrote a 30-page business plan for personal digital assistants that would give

skippers the information at their fingertips in the dugouts. He wanted to sell the plan to conferences, so every team would have the tendencies of conference opponents.

Stough left PricewaterhouseCoopers after five months to return to Lassen as an assistant baseball coach. He wanted to incubate his idea from a dugout. To supplement his income, he taught calculus, trigonometry and computer science at the college, and trigonometry at a local high school.

As he mentioned his plan to baseball people, he realized how many of them resisted change.

"Coaches weren't ready to get their brains around this," he said.

Stough faced a similar struggle to the one described by author Michael Lewis in the recent book "Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game." It's about Oakland general manager Billy Beane using nontraditional means to select players in order to keep the A's, a small-market team, competitive.

Stough was ahead of the curve. Baseball wouldn't pay him for his software, but other industries would. He met a Northern California sawmill manager who needed help reconciling his books with his inventory. Stough wrote a software application for him, then did five more.

He put baseball on the back burner in 1993 and formed a company to build custom software applications in Reno, Nev. Among the clients was International Game Technology, which bills itself as "the world leader in slot machine and video gaming machine design and production."

Stough parted ways with his business partner after two years. Stough moved to Corpus Christi, Texas, where his parents lived, and began Syntex. Two companies that jumped onboard initially were Lake Area Industry Alliance plants Citgo and PPG.

Today, Syntex has 45 employees, including LaGrange High graduate Catherine Parrino, the company's vice president of marketing and business development. Some employees work remotely in Utah, North Carolina and France. Stough telecommutes when he can from Lake Arthur.

He and his wife, Jena, live on her family farm, the Byler farm. Members of her family manage the rice, crawfish and cattle on the 1,200 acres.

Ideally, Stough would work from the farm on Mondays and Fridays, and be in Houston on the days between. He's on the road more than that, though.

The Syntex office is in Greenway Plaza, smack dab in Houston's business community.

"I go there and live amongst the land of the cement, then I come back to the crawfish, hunting and zydeco music. It's a great balance," Stough said.

He will join Ernst & Young's other regional winners for the National Entrepreneur of the Year Awards in November in Palm Springs. It'll be around the time Jena is due to give birth to their second child.

Stough still cries watching "Field of Dreams." He had Astros season tickets last year, club level behind home plate.

He'd like to coach again one day, preferably high school or American Legion.