

ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

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Diamondbacks behind the wheel

Womack, Gonzalez, Grace: what's in the garage?

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D'backs behind the wheel

By Jill Amadio - Photos by Dick Reed and Joe Sage

H2 Hummer photos: Dick Reed



■ Take one Hummer H2 in black, add chrome details sparingly, mix in tastefully detailed high-end personal electronics, upsize the wheels just a bit (in chrome, of course), and you're ready to stand out from the pack.

■ Take one Lamborghini Diablo Roadster as is, select a D'backs-compatible paint job, upgrade the wheels, and you're ready to steal home.

You're knocking down a decent MLB salary. You're wearing a World Series Championship ring. The ring is on your finger, your hand is on the wheel. Well, that wheel just naturally has to be connected to something pretty special.

Bristling with the biggest SUV bullies on the block, the Arizona Diamondbacks' parking lot is largely home to a herd of menacing Hummer H2s and their like. Sending out the unmistakable signal: Don't mess with me, buddy, on or off the field, the H2s are owned by eight of the ballplayers and tower over most every other car and sport utility in their private parking lot.

Tony Womack

Almost hidden and slotted between the high, squared-off shoulders of all those Hummers you'll see one vehicle like no



Courtesy Arizona Diamondbacks

other. It is a flamboyant blue scuro1999 Lamborghini Diablo Roadster, belonging to the sport's record-breaking stolen-base master Tony Womack, who dropped fifteen bunts last year and is on track to break 300 career stolen bases this season. For one of the fastest men in baseball, this ride is just

right. Sitting low to the ground, breezing just above the asphalt, the wicked-looking roadster is a familiar sight as Tony cruises along the highway between Phoenix and Tucson during spring training.

The roadster wears a custom license plate that sums up Tony's philosophy and identity but could make him an easy target for the highway patrol; in the interests of protecting his privacy, however, we're not publishing the license number. If you're a fan and you see it, you'll figure it out.

We found ourselves unexpectedly driving behind this magnificent machine while returning from a photo shoot in Tucson and can report that Womack was a perfect gentleman on the road, driving most circumspectly, keeping to a decent speed and always making sure to tuck back into the right hand lane—with a signal—after passing uphill eighteen-wheelers. This base stealing champ clearly knows the value of signals and timing.

Isn't it tempting to unleash that awesome power? "Sure," said Tony, "but I

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Lamborghini photos: Joe Sage





Lamborghini photos: Joe Sage



Courtesy Arizona Diamondbacks

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already know what it can do. I take it out to some remote place if I want to let loose, but never on a highway. That'd be foolish." Lamborghini is known to hide a built-in radar detector in most of its models. Mario Andretti owns a 2000 model and remarked a couple of years ago that he was most grateful to the engineers for this thoughtful addition.

Meticulous about every aspect of his roadster, Tony might spend weeks searching for just the right wheels, for instance, for his Lambo. "I wanted to get bigger wheels. The wheels that came with the car are pretty neat, chrome, but they're only 18-inch and I wanted to go bigger, to 19-inch." But then he wondered if the larger wheels might affect the car's engineering. "I didn't want anything that would compromise the performance," he said. Ultimately, his Diablo is sporting a brand new set of Maya chro-mes and Pirelli red-letter P-Zeroes at 19" and 20".

Lamborghini's rise from tractor vendor to supercar factory has been given solid financial footing with its acquisition by Audi. The successor to the Countach, the Diablo (now succeeded by the Murcié-lago) is a state-of-the-art four-wheel-drive two-seater built specifically for the US market. The mid-engined roadster has a removable roof that can be stored over the engine cover. Take the cover off one of these magnificent Italian-designed machines, and there's reading material on the 5.7-liter block describing the firing order of the car's twelve cylinders. Pumping out 530 horsepower at 7,100 rpm for a top speed of

around 210 mph, Lambos can leap from zero to 60 mph in a smidgeon under four seconds. That's fast.

"It sure is," agrees Womack. "But nothing like drag racing. Now, that's something I want to get into when I've finished with baseball. Imagine sitting there with all that power throbbing under your hands, waiting for the start signal, and holding that baby back! Man. That's excitement. That's moving. Can't you just feel what it'd be like?"

Sort of like stealing second base, perhaps? Speaking of which, this personalized license plate will be kept confidential also.

One thing's for sure. Racing is in the Diablo's blood. Its giant-sized disc brakes bring the driver quickly to a halt, and the suspension system is also racing-special, inherited from Lamborghini's racing efforts, with cockpit-adjustable stabilizer bars similar to those in an Indy 500 racer. The price, ranging between \$239,000 and \$333,500, may be high but buyers receive a leather jacket, a hat, driving/running shoes, a competition racing suit, gloves, sunglasses, a car cover, and luggage.

With little room for anything but two elegantly slender people in the front seats, and maybe a couple of golf clubs in the Diablo's five feet of cargo space, Tony gets behind the wheel of his Hummer when it's time for carrying passengers, like his wife and their two children.

Like many who cherish their vehicles and enjoy customizing them, Tony takes just as much care choosing extra neat touches for his H2 as his Diablo. In fact, the H2 has been subject to many custom details (moreso than some of the other players' H2s). This time, chrome plays an important role. Womack's Hummer has a chrome brush guard and subtle chroming of the recessed Hummer badging on the bumper. The hitch loop has been tastefully chromed, as have the door handles, roof rack bars and logo ends, door sill plate logos, hinges, and mirror brackets. All in all, the selective use of the shiny metal sets Tony's Hummer apart, but not so it's too obtrusive. Just enough to know someone cared enough to make it very special.

Word has it that Shaquille O'Neal chromed the skidplate on the underbody of his H2, which Tony thinks is going a bit too far.

This Hummer has high-end personal audi and video, from a Diamond Audio Technology powered sound system pumping the tunes through speakers lightly trimmed in purple neon in the rear cargo area, to upsized Kenwood DVD screens for the kids in back.

Tony has plus-sized his chrome wheels and tires, but not too much—more could affect performance. "It's all about balance," he said, "keeping everything balanced."

Womack's life off the field is not only balanced, it is generous, like all the other Diamondback players who give their time and resources to the less fortunate. An enthusiastic proponent of literacy, Tony established the Cover-to-Cover Reading Competition that encourages grade school kids to read and be rewarded with attendance at Diamondback games as his guest. He's spent the last three years at the opening day of the Phoenix Open signing autographs for kids.

Luis Gonzalez

Outselling every other high-end SUV on the market, the 2003 H2 is much more luxurious, although narrower, than its predecessor... but still commands respect. "It's so huge, yet much easier to drive, and looks a lot better than the earlier model," said outfielder Luis Gonzalez, who tucks his lanky 6'2" frame into an Escalade when he's not behind the wheel of his H2. "I like the vertical liftgate, that's real practical. It's kind of sporty, too, and rides real good. But, when all is said and done, it's still a truck. But a neat one, plus you can take this thing anywhere and keep on going."

Priced around \$50,000, this year's Hummers have high-end features includ-



Photo: Joe Sage

■ Just one shy of a starting lineup, at press time eight of the D'backs had a personal H2 Hummer.

ing GPS and telephones, tubular steps that come down low for easier entrance, split folding seats, and sumptuous backrests. Then there's the steering wheel controls for the stereo, air conditioning and heater, and trip computer, plus OnStar, and front and rear trailer-hitch receivers.

Along with all these advantages, there's yet one more: many Hummer owners, especially lawyers, doctors, and other professionals, are buying H2s as a tax write-off due to a detail in the tax laws. Back in the mid-1980s Congress said that luxury vehicles cannot be written off as business vehicles unless they had a gross weight of 6,000 lbs or more. The H2 weighs around 6,300 lbs.

Although interior room is spacious and Gonzo loves driving the Hummer, he rents a much larger vehicle when he takes his family, who reside in Scottsdale, on vacation. "We get a rock-band bus," he said. "Man, they are fitted out so great. With all the kids and the babysitters, and my wife and I, it makes a whole lot more sense to

have that big bus when we go to Las Vegas and other places. We can really relax, put the kids to sleep in real comfortable little beds, and just have a great time while

we're on the road. We can all watch TV, or play cards, and just kick back."

The father of five-year old triplets, Megan, Jacob, and Alyssa, Luis said his wife Christine prefers driving their 2003 Escalade. "It's more comfortable to handle than the Hummer," he said, "but she gets a kick out of riding in that monster sometimes."

Luis and Christine established the highly popular Kids Going Gonzo for School local program, and he also participates in



Courtesy Arizona Diamondbacks

Arizona Quest for Kids, a scholarship program designed to keep students in Arizona rather than study in other states. What would he drive if he didn't have the triplets? "How about something real small, like a Volkswagen GTI?" he quipped.

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Mark Grace

One of the players who confesses to being a non-H2 owner is first baseman Mark Grace, #17, who



Courtesy Arizona Diamondbacks

is as laid back as they come once he's away from the ballpark. A resident of Paradise Valley with his wife Tanya and son

Jackson, he claims he lives a quiet life. The three-time All-Star and four-time Rawlings Gold Glove Award winner said he has no desire to get behind the wheel of a hotshot car. "I'm kind of a conservative guy and I like a conservative car. Nothing fancy. I'm no speed demon, although I do enjoy my car's V8 engine and 294 horsepower—which is more than enough for me. The sedate XJ8 Jaguar Vanden Plas suits me fine. I've driven Jags for twelve years; I just keep getting the newest model." Grace said he prefers the sedan to the coupe; it fits his 6'2" frame better because of its 118-inch wheelbase, giving him space to stretch.

"For long drives with the family, we take our Escalade," he said. "I'm from Fullerton, in Southern California, and when we're back there we love to go to the mountains and the beach, and our SUV is great for that." Any special customizing on the Vanden Plas? "Nope," he said. "It's just a regular Jag." The 2003 XJ8 Vanden Plas costs close to \$70,000 and has all the



Courtesy Arizona Diamondbacks

luxury features Jaguar can throw into the mix, including front and rear heated seats, Connolly leather trim everywhere, lambswool footwell rugs, walnut writing trays that fold down from the front seatbacks, and the 4.0-liter AJ-V8 teamed with a four-speed automatic transmission.

Off the field, Mark plays golf and supports charities through the Mark Grace Foundation, whose marquee event is an annual golf tournament in Scottsdale, just before spring training begins. It benefits the Arizona Leukemia Society.

Psychologists maintain that Americans have a need to express themselves both intellectually and emotionally, and that this quality is as necessary as food, water and shelter. Judging from the Diamondbacks' stable of Hummer and performance cars, the players are feeling just fine. ■

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International award-winning journalist **JILL AMADIO** has covered the automotive and motorsports scene for 20 years. The author of six books, her latest is a biography, "Günther Rall: Luftwaffe Ace and NATO General." She writes a monthly column for *Entrepreneur* magazine, and also writes for *AMI Auto World* and www.thecarconnection.com. She has written for *Road & Track* and Conde Nast Publications, and her syndicated car column has appeared in the *Washington Times*, *Houston Chronicle* and 124 other newspapers. She was the first female syndicated automotive columnist for Gannett Newspapers. For five years Jill worked with the Skoal Bandit Indy Car, NASCAR, Can Am and drag racing programs as a publicist.