

A good eye for quality

Five-time Cy Young Award winner Randy Johnson knows about precision and mechanics

By Becky Antiooco

Here in Arizona, the seasons known to the rest of the world as winter and spring are referred to as “auction season” and “spring training season.” The seasons collided recently, when we met up with former Diamondback pitcher Randy Johnson at the home of auto auction icon Craig Jackson.

On the mound, Johnson was known for his deadly speed and precision. He ranks second in total strikeouts, behind Nolan Ryan, and is one of only 30 pitchers to have hurled an immaculate inning, striking out three batters in one inning with only nine pitches. Over the years, Johnson honed his skill, tweaked his technique, and transformed raw power into precision by working on the mechanics and ironing out the kinks in his delivery.

It’s that focus on mechanics, the desire for precision, that fueled Johnson’s fascination with watches, and his eventual designation as brand ambassador for exclusive watchmaker Ulysse Nardin.

“Watches always fascinated me. In every city I traveled to, I gravitated toward the upscale watch stores. I started purchasing them, then following the different companies to see when the latest watches were coming out,” says Johnson. “Initially, it was how shiny they were—the bling factor. But there’s obviously so much more to it: the complications of the movements, the workmanship and craftsmanship, and understanding how they work.”

Johnson estimates that he owns 50 to 60 watches, which are easier to collect, in terms of storage, than are cars. But, there are similarities in the two hobbies.

“When you’re buying something special, there’s something that draws you to it,” he observes. “And then after awhile, you dig a little deeper to find out about what it’s all about. What went into making it? How many were made? Why is it so special?”

While Johnson takes that view on watch collecting, for him, cars are more of an accessory, something that will “go fast, look cool and be dependable.” Which isn’t to say that he doesn’t value some of the same characteristics in an automobile that he does in a watch, namely, exclusivity. For example, parked in Johnson’s garage right now is a Bentley GT Supersport, purchased because it was more unique than the Arnage that previously occupied that spot, less prolific.

And for a guy who professes to be more



Randy Johnson and Craig Jackson enjoying “Men’s Night Out” at Craig Jackson’s house. • (Opposite page) We meet Randy Johnson amid classic and modern muscle. • (Below) The collectible Ulysse Nardin Big Unit Chronograph.

interested in watches than cars, Johnson has had his share of impressive rides. There was the custom prototype Dodge Durango with Carol Shelby’s autograph on the dash, which he purchased at Barrett-Jackson and drove to and from the ballpark. Then a twin-turbo Porsche 993, custom built by Uwe Gemballa to accommodate Johnson’s 6-foot 10-inch frame.


But it all started with a Ford Pinto. Drafted by the Montreal Expos after graduating from USC in 1985, Johnson traveled to Florida for minor league spring training. In need of a vehicle, he went to a used car lot and paid about \$5000 for a blue Pinto with the words “US Mail” stenciled on the side, and with the passenger seat removed to



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"A couple of friends and I went out to a club one night and we had it valet parked. Here's this mail truck car, with no passenger seat, and we go, 'Yeah, here are the keys. Go ahead and valet park this,'" he laughs. "That wasn't really a car that chicks dig."

Eventually, the radiator went out and Johnson abandoned the Pinto on the side of the road, never to hear or see it again. When he made the big leagues, he bought a nice "status car," like a BMW or Mercedes, and later, when he had the money and the opportunity, a Ferrari.

"I will never forget that Pinto, though," he says. "It reminds me where I started, and where I came from."

In watches and in cars, for Johnson, it's all about enjoyment, but he does offer some practical advice: "The one thing I've come to learn is that, if you're going to buy something, buy it. Get as much information on the car, the watch, whatever, and purchase it right then. Because when it's gone, it's gone. And if you do find it again, you're not going to pay retail for it. That's the way business is and the way life is."

Looking around at Craig Jackson's collection, Johnson notes, "At one time, I probably could've had a garage like this. But there's a lot that goes along with owning these kinds of cars.

"It's kind of like the watches. You can have a quarter of a million dollar watch, but you've got to keep the movement going. You have these cars, you have to run them. For me, it's all about enjoying, whether it's a nice car or a nice watch, but I never wanted to have the caretakers you need for the cars."

Today, Johnson is happy with his Bentley, his affiliation with Ulysse Nardin, and his life after baseball.

"When I was playing baseball, and young, it was a great time in my life," he reflects. "I didn't have a care in the world, and I worked hard for everything I had, and I enjoyed. I have no regrets about the cars I've had. Or the watches."

Ulysse Nardin released a limited edition Big Unit Chronograph in late 2012. Packaged in a baseball themed box, it came with an official major league baseball autographed by Randy Johnson. Only 100 were made, and it originally retailed for \$15,500. ■



(Above) Glenn Marshall, owner of E.D. Marshall Jewelers; Randy Johnson; Nelson Lucero, vice president of Ulysse Nardin; and Ahmad Shahriar, Ulysse Nardin regional sales manager. (Left) This Ulysse Nardin Freak Phantom watch can be yours for just \$137,000. (Below) "Men's Night Out" at Craig Jackson's house attracted fans of both genders, to mingle with watches and cars.

