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Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame

15 West Third Street, Jamestown, NY 14701

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From Jamestown To Cooperstown

263 major league baseball players have once called Jamestown, NY their baseball home – and now 2 of them reside in the cross-state village of Cooperstown. Nellie Fox, a member of the 1944 Jamestown Falcons, was enshrined in the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1997. Randy Johnson, a player on the 1985 Jamestown Expos, who stands over a foot taller than the diminutive Fox, was inducted into baseball's shrine on July 26, 2015.

Matt Spielman, assistant sports editor of *The Post-Journal*, took a look at the career of Johnson in a January 11, 2015 story that follows. Post-Journal sports editor Scott Kindberg contributed to this report.

Tim Johnson, grandson of CSHOF inductee Nelson Turnell, was at the Cooperstown induction ceremony and provided the three photos of Johnson that accompany Spielman's article.

Big Unit's Ride To The Hall Began At College Stadium

In the summer of 1985, Bob Gebhard, Montreal Expos farm system director, told the front office staff of the Jamestown Expos that a highly touted prospect named Randy Johnson would be pitching for the New York-Penn League franchise that summer.



Jeff Brucculeri, a 1982 Jamestown High School graduate who was serving as an assistant to General Manager Frank Wren that year before heading to Oral Roberts University in the fall, thought he would get a close-up look at the Expos' "new toy" in the bullpen during a two-week camp leading into the season.

Brucculeri quickly learned he might not want to get too close.

"I heard he was going to be throwing down in the bullpen so I was going to stand behind the catcher and take some pictures," Brucculeri said by phone Wednesday evening

from his Tulsa, Oklahoma-area home.

"Once I saw a couple of pitches I thought, 'This probably isn't a good idea,' so I moved to the side and took a few more photos. That was my first experience with Randy's fastball."

Standing 6 feet, 10 inches tall, wildness was a problem for the Expos' second-round pick in the 1985 entry draft. Johnson posted a 0-3 record in eight starts, walking 24 and striking out 21 in 27 innings during his first professional season in Jamestown.

"We're talking about a huge human being. You're not used to seeing a 6-10 baseball player," said Frank Wren, the general manager of the 1985 Jamestown Expos team who also played with the Jamestown Falcons in 1978 and later coached the team in 1981 and 1982. "Watching him throw the baseball in our workouts, it was obvious he had electric stuff. He came with a tender shoulder so he wasn't able to pitch a lot, but when we got him on the mound his stuff was electric."

According to some people with knowledge of the situation, the Montreal organization was actually a bit down on Johnson in the beginning of his career with some suggesting that he had covered up an arm injury before the first-year player draft.

"Randy had signed for a \$100,000 bonus and was awaiting the check in Jamestown," Greg Peterson, Jamestown baseball historian and a member of the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame, said Saturday night. "The check had come and was in Wren's desk, but they were waiting because they weren't sure if Randy was going to be a success or not. Frank held on to the check for a while, even though Randy came every day asking for it."

On days he wasn't pitching, those involved with the team quickly learned of another love Johnson had. "One day before a game, Johnson was sitting on the side of the dugout when I walked by with my Canon AE1 camera hanging from my neck with a telephoto lens," former Post-Journal sports editor and Expos official scorer Jim Riggs recalled Friday. "Johnson asked if he could look at my camera and then gave it a thorough examination. I didn't know at the time that Johnson was quite an amateur photographer and later during his playing career he was hired for some photo assignments for national magazines."



For those who saw Johnson close up at then-College Stadium that summer, a call to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown nearly 30 years later seemed like one of the more unlikely achievements that would come in the University of Southern California alum's future.

"At that point (1985), it's a long road to get to the big leagues. It's a long road to establish yourself as a major leaguer and then to dominate at the major league level for such a long period of time, no one could envision that," Wren said.

During his time in Jamestown, Johnson shared a casual relationship with Brucculeri and the rest of the front-office staff. As a matter of fact, Brucculeri actually created the Expos' mascot Yippee in 1983 and shared a stall in the Expos' locker room at the stadium on game days.

But Brucculeri also shared a serious relationship with the 21-year-old Johnson. The 50-year-old Oral Roberts broadcast communications graduate recalled Wednesday a talk he had with the young left-hander at the end of the 1985 season when Johnson was struggling on the mound and planned to make a visit to Dr. Frank Jobe in Los Angeles to discuss some arm trouble. Brucculeri served as the Baseball Chapel leader for the Expos, but Johnson hadn't been to chapel for much of the season and wasn't necessarily religious.

"Randy didn't come regularly to chapel, but he did come the day he found out he would have to see Dr. Jobe," Brucculeri said. "I was kind of happy to see him there. After chapel he came up to me and said he wasn't going to church much, but he would really appreciate it if I'd pray for him. That's when I thought,

'Wow, this is pretty serious.' We talked a little bit longer and I wished him the best. You could tell he was special."

That offseason, Greg Peterson and his wife were invited to Montreal as guests of the Expos. Peterson recalled a moment when he was about to meet Baseball Hall of Famer Duke Snider.

"I chatted with Randy in an office," Peterson said. "We were both waiting to meet Montreal's announcer, Duke Snider, to get a picture and an autograph with him. I never thought to get a photo with Randy or an autograph."

Johnson moved progressively through the Expos' minor league system the next four seasons, going 8-7 with a 3.26 ERA and 111 strikeouts in 113 innings with AAA Indianapolis in the 1988 season before being called up to the majors early in the 1989 season.



In May of 1989, Johnson was traded to Seattle along with Gene Harris and Brian Holman for Mark Langston and Mike Campbell. With the Mariners, Johnson flourished, going 130-74 with a 3.42 ERA, 51 complete games, 19 shutouts and 2,162 strikeouts over 10 seasons.

"Once he got to Seattle ... you could see he was one of the most dominant pitchers in the game," Wren said. "Then it was a matter of, if this guy can stay healthy he has a chance to be really, really special. Then you can start talking about Hall of Fame credentials."

On Christmas Day in 1992, Johnson's father died after suffering a massive heart attack. In the wake of his father's death, Johnson considered leaving baseball, but reconsidered after discussing it with his mother. It was then, according to Brucculeri, that Johnson became closer to the Lord.

"Randy was a pretty wild guy and loved rock 'n roll headbanger stuff," Brucculeri said. "But in Seattle, right after his father died, Donnie Moore (of Baseball Chapel) invited Randy to Bible study. Randy was pretty upset, so he went and that is when he ended up giving his heart to the Lord.

"Years later I met Donnie at a church in Tulsa and later we sat near each other at a Baseball Chapel convention in Florida. I told Donnie that Randy was our connection."

Wren and his family met up with Johnson in the mid-1990s and Wren, who moved on to the Florida Marlins in 1991 and later to the Baltimore Orioles and Atlanta Braves as their general manager, was taken aback by how much Johnson had changed from their time together in Jamestown.

"It was amazing that he had really become more outgoing, more communicative," Wren said. "It was a big transformation from the big kid who reported to Jamestown and was still trying to learn as a person and a player."

In December of 2008, Johnson signed what at the time was the second-biggest contract in the majors with the Arizona Diamondbacks. Soon after, he would cross paths with Chad Chiffin, another Jamestown native, who was working in the Diamondbacks' clubhouse.

Chiffin worked with the Diamondbacks' AAA team in Tucson from 1999-2001, but in the fall of 2001 Chiffin himself received a call-up to the big leagues for the Diamondbacks' memorable run to the World Series title.

Chiffin, who until this past season was in charge of the kitchen in the home team's clubhouse, had quite a lot of interaction with the players and said, "We see them more than their family."

"Randy used to eat at home a lot, but I remember that he liked beef stew," Chiffin said. "He was good to me, he had a good sense of humor. I hear from him a little bit here and there. We talked about Jamestown a few times."

What impressed Chiffin about Johnson was that he was very regimented.

"He was a physical specimen and he had a lot of things he needed to do to get ready to pitch every time," Chiffin said Wednesday by phone from his home in Arizona. "The training staff did a tremendous job with him."

"You didn't mess with Randy on days he started."

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After the Diamondbacks won the World Series in a memorable Fall Classic in 2001 that was pushed back due to the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and ended with Luis Gonzalez's RBI single off of the New York Yankees' Mariano Rivera, Chiffin took the opportunity to have pictures snapped with several of the Diamondbacks, including Mark Grace, Mike Morgan and the "Big Unit" himself, Randy Johnson.

"I got along with Randy great," Chiffin said. "We talked a lot of music because we had similar tastes. He actually brought me a CD once of the band Primus. There are not a lot of people who like the band Primus, but we were a couple of them."

Chiffin also recalled a time when Johnson, one of the most talented and most recognized baseball players of all time, was star-struck after inviting Geddy Lee of Rush into the locker room.

"Randy was in awe of this guy," Chiffin said. "Geddy is a huge baseball fan and it was pretty cool to bring him in now and then when Rush was in town."

From a 0-3 rookie campaign in Jamestown to a career that included five Cy Young awards, 10 all-star games, 303 wins, 3,346 strikeouts and a World Series MVP award, Johnson had become the rock star.

"He came with a very unique package, a 6-10 left who threw bullets," Wren said. "It's a credit to him that he persevered."

"Once he learned how to use his stuff and learned how to command it, he really turned himself into one of the most dominant pitchers of our age."