

# IT'S NOT ABOUT THE BENJAMINS - Or Is It?

*Baseball star John Burkett had childhood dreams of becoming a pro bowler - a few years from now, he may pursue that interest on the senior tour*

by Jim Goodwin

Whenever I hear a professional athlete say "I don't play for the money," the first thing I want to know is how much money they make. Isn't earning a living and making as much money as you can the purpose of making a sport your profession? In most cases, aren't earnings a measure of success?

For those athletes who are fond of

being a pro bowler. But after a couple of good years as a high school pitcher, the San Francisco Giants offered him \$13,000 as a 6<sup>th</sup> round draft pick." I thought I could retire on that," he recalled.

Had he chosen to pursue his favorite sport of bowling on a professional level, his career and his life would have

Actually, Burkett has something in common with *two* of the greatest bowlers of all time, Earl Anthony and Walter Ray. Anthony's first love was baseball, and he turned to bowling only because of an injury, which ended his pursuit of a career as a pro pitcher like Burkett. Walter Ray is also a pitcher, but of horseshoes. Like Burkett, he

than I thought I would, and I made plenty of money to be able to retire. I met Willie Mays and Willie McCovey early in my career, and they really couldn't afford to retire. They were 100 times the player I was, so I try not to complain. It just sounds like sour grapes. I'm happy with my career, and I have no regrets."

Burkett firmly believes that the pro bowlers are athletes who should earn higher wages, but he is as stumped as the rest of us about the remedy. "If I had the answer," he said, "I would get a group of guys together and buy the tour. I would love to see these guys make the same kind of money golfers or baseball players make. These guys have the same talent as golfers, and I really don't understand why people don't respect it to a point of putting more money into it. I wish I had the answer. I'd love to see these guys get the money and recognition they deserve."

With baseball behind him, Burkett has turned his attention to his family. He and his wife have three children, 12-year-old boy-girl twins, and an 11-year-old daughter. "I've really enjoyed the three years I've been home," he said. The kids are into basketball, baseball, cheerleading, and other stuff, and we're always chasing them around." The family also enjoys traveling together. Snow skiing is a favorite vacation get-a-way.

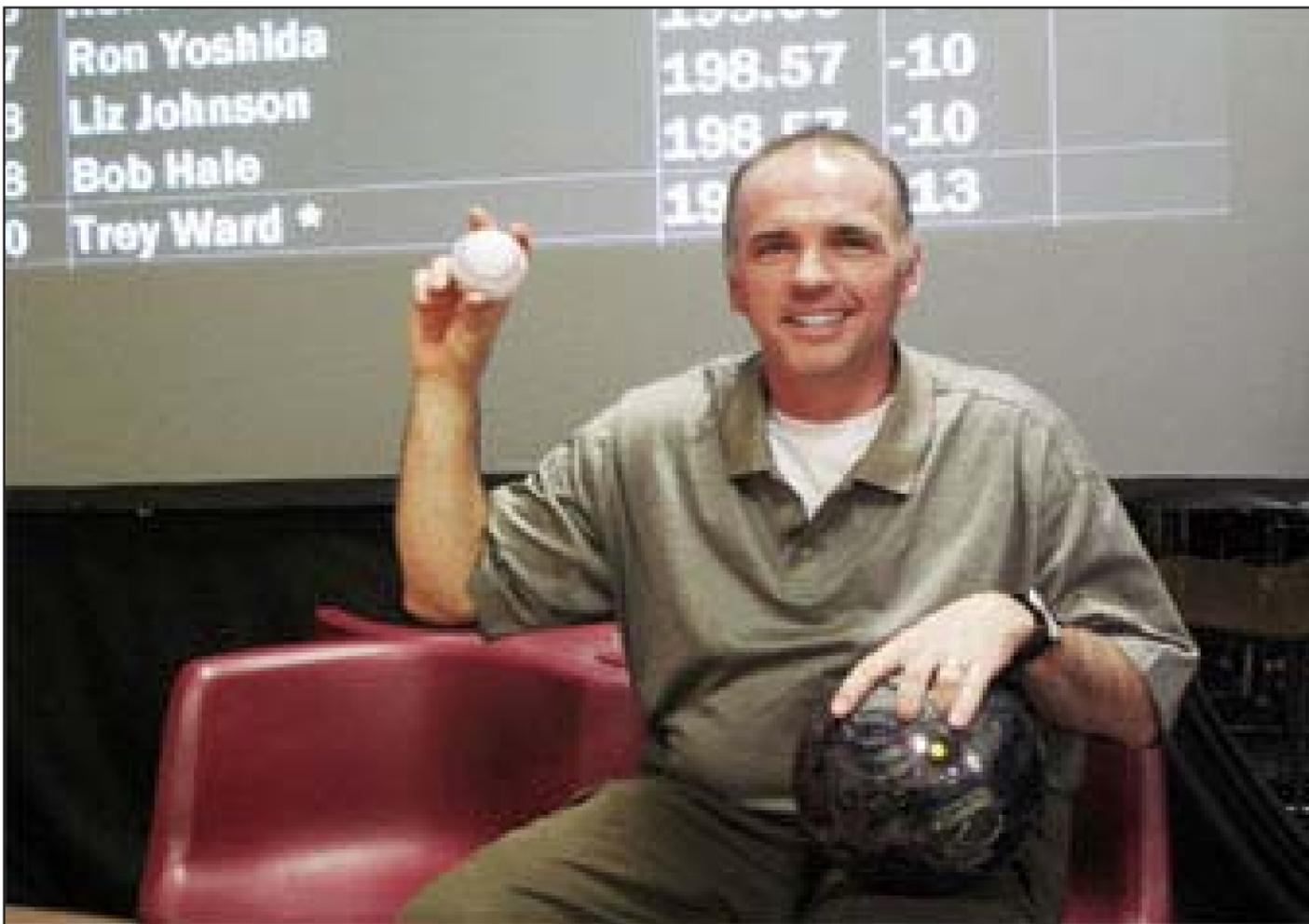
Bowling professionally will also have to wait. At 42, he's in that limbo stage where he can't bowl with the seniors and it's hard to beat the young guns. He will jump into a few regional events, but doesn't want to travel to bowl, because it takes away family time.

He hasn't, however, ruled out a crack at the senior tour in a few years, maybe after his kids are off to college. "I might do that when my family gets tired of seeing me," he said. "It's definitely

something I think about. I'm not sure about the grind of being out every week like these guys. That's a tough life. But I do

love bowling, and I'd love to compete with these guys."

Now, if the PBA could just figure out how to boost the prize money, Burkett's future senior tour competitors could afford the same hotels he stays in.



John Burkett

having a few large currency notes dangling from their wallets, bowling is probably not a wise career choice; which is why John Burkett chose to spend his prime years as a professional athlete in the sport of baseball.

"Burky," as his teammates called him, is also a very good bowler. He retired from baseball in 2004 after a very nice 15-year career in the major leagues. During that decade and a half, from 1990 - 2003, Burkett earned, by baseball standards, a modest \$38 million, according to Baseball Almanac.

His final two years, he earned \$11 million pitching for the Boston Red Sox.

Burkett bowled at a very tender age, and got into juniors at age eight. He set duck pins at the little center where he grew up in Beaver, Pennsylvania, and earned a whopping \$3.00 an hour as a teenager there. He dreamed of

been drastically different. In a career that now spans over 25 years, Walter Ray Williams Jr., who has earned more than any pro bowler, has earned only one-tenth of Burkett's salary. Add to that the fact that Burkett was certainly not in the same "super-star" category as WRW, and the disparity of earnings potential is magnified to the tenth de-

gree. "My first love was bowling," Burkett told me when we talked during the PBA Geico Classic in Dallas. His sports celebrity status got him the commissioner's exemption that week to butt heads with Walter Ray and company. He finished in the 50-somethings.

Young Award given to the year's best hurler. A year like that in today's world of supercharged salaries would assure a huge new contract. "I try not to think about it," said Burkett. "I was very blessed. I don't think I had a great career, but it was above average. I played in the majors for 15 years, way more

loves two sports, and he chose the one where he could make the best living. When I pointed this out to Burkett, he said, "Yeah, but Walter Ray is a world champion at both sports."

Burkett may not have had a Hall of Fame career, but he did well. In 1993, he had a 22-7 record and finished fourth in the race for the coveted Cy

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