

Interview #2 – Who Am I? - John Woolsey

I was born September 26, 1949.

I have a passion for cars since age 11 when I started working on a 1933 Chevy 2-door sedan (which I still own today). My Dad owned an auto parts store and his two employees were into hot rods and racing, so I was always around people who talked cars. My older brother and I also ran with an older group of guys who were into drag racing.

With my brother, I built a “street” car that we drag raced occasionally when I was in high school. When I was 16, I won a money bracket at Carlsbad Raceway two Friday nights in a row driving one of my older friend’s car. I was mentioned in Drag News, which at the time was a national weekly paper.

In 1969, I started building an Anglia (an English Ford) powered by a 427 Chevy engine. At the time, the car was a popular drag car because they were small and light. It was a unibody car, so I built a full tube frame for it with a roll cage and finished it by mid-1970. I did drive it on the street occasionally, but I knew mostly not to. By 1974 the car had close to 600 horsepower. I ran it in the high 9 second range and upwards of 140 MPH in a quarter mile. I had my picture taken with it published in Drag News from Orange County International Raceway a few times in the early 70’s and the car was also featured in Car Craft magazine featuring home-built muscle cars.

I also ran the best numbers recorded in three different cars of friends. I raced very aggressively. I have often said that driving any race car is 30% skill and 70% reckless abandonment.

By age 20, I knew as much about cars as mechanics ten years older. So, when I was 21, I began working for the City of Escondido in the motor pool department. I worked there for 37 years – 30 years as a supervisor – until I retired in 2007 when I was 58. I was a Supervisor for the last 30 of those years. When I retired, my department was responsible for about 750 motor vehicles. I still work on “classic” cars to this day.

I started playing softball when I joined a night league in 1968 and I continued to play for 24 years until 1992. I did 150 lb. wrist curls in my twenties and I always hit balls for long distances, so hitting softballs came naturally. I stopped playing for 15 years until I began again in 2007 when I retired. My employment ended Wednesday and I played softball on Thursday in the Carlsbad recreation league.

After not playing softball for 15 years, I found the recreation league to be a great place to practice my skills, like many others in our league have done. I played in the recreation league for 4 years. While there, I heard about the “upper league” (our NCSS-Competitive Division), but I was told it was full of guys with big egos and no fun. The recreation league included a bunch of great guys and many with excellent skills, so I had no reason to leave.

Then I discovered that the upper league used high technology bats while the recreation league used aluminum bats. I played on a recreation league team in the annual 2011 NCSS Camp Pendleton tournament. A player let me use his 30-ounce Miken composite bat and I hit three or four balls out of

sight for home runs. I was hooked. So, when asked to join several other players moving to our NCCS-Competitive Division, I said, "Sign me up."

This is now my 8th year in our league. Frankly, while I enjoy the more consistent level of competitive skills in our league, there is little difference in egos, arguments (ours may even have less), or competitive spirit between the leagues. Friends make both leagues fun.

I have also enjoyed the many home run contests in which I participated, and the recognition for hitting for distance that word of mouth has given me when I play in tournaments. But despite my love of softball (and car racing), my main claim to fame is arm wrestling.



I started arm wrestling in May of 1972 at a single elimination tournament under the auspices of Jim McKay's Wide World of Sports. I lost in the quarterfinals but learned I was competitive. The next year I went back and won the World's Wrist-wrestling Championship. Truthfully, I felt like I won rather easily.

These tournaments were for fun, but in 1974 the U.S. Pro Arm-wrestling Championship was held in Busch Gardens in the San Fernando Valley and offered \$750 to the winner, which to me was a lot of money. So, I entered and won, and I am now generally acknowledged as the first winner of a "professional" arm wrestling tournament. I won it the next year also.

I later won the 1977 National AWA Championship in the Open weight, left hand class. This was the first professional tournament that recognized lefthanded arm wrestlers.

Arm wrestling is a test of skill and strength, but most of all, you must will yourself to victory. Winning must be life or death. Some matches last only a second, most last much longer, while others last up to five minutes or more and are referred to as a "grinder" match. One grinder match and you are done for that tournament; you cannot physically continue.

I quit arm wrestling at the age of 41 in 1990 when I started feeling joint pain, although I felt like I was the strongest ever in my life. And that is where I left it until 13 years later when I went to a practice session in a friend's house. Someone there started talking to me about how I was "a god in the 70's," and he asked me to arm wrestle. We wrestled; I won.

He told me that the sport now had Masters and Grandmasters classes and that I should come back and compete in the Grandmasters (50-year-old) class. He thought I would do well.

Soon the discussion led to getting me to attend an upcoming international pro event in Las Vegas that was also going to have Masters class events. I went to watch and loved connecting with old friends there and I caught the bug to compete again. I started training.

The next year in 2006 I went back and won the tournament in the Grandmaster 200lb class and in the open heavyweight Grandmaster class.

I went to Denver a few months later to the U.S. Unified Nationals and came in 2nd in the Grandmasters heavyweight class and qualified for the U.S. team to go to the World Arm-wrestling Federation (WAF) matches in Manchester, England in October 2006.

The following year I traveled to Harford, Conn. For the World Championship and won the heavyweight Grandmaster class. But I realized I was close to 60 years old and wrestling guys who just turned 50, and I weighed around 200 lbs. while guys I wrestled were closer to 300 lbs. So, I dropped to the 90 kg/198 lb. light heavyweight class.

In that class, I won the 2008 WAF Worlds in Canada and defended that title in Porto Vero, Italy in 2009. The following year, I won the WAF Worlds in the Ultra Grandmaster (60 yrs. old) class. I never lost a match in the 90 kg/198 lb. class.

In 2011, shoulder arthritis caused me to quit arm wrestling and to concentrate on playing competitive softball in our NCSS league and in tournaments. Arm wrestling and weightlifting gave me the wrist and upper body strength to hit for distance. The furthest ball I ever hit in our league was a ball that landed in the top of last tree right in front of the apartment buildings behind Field 3.

Of course, my favorite baseball player is the "Big Basher," Babe Ruth. My cousin owns a ball signed by Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig when the Yankees played their minor league affiliate in Minnesota in 1929. My grandfather went into the locker room after the game and got their signatures.

My wife and I have been married for 49 years. We live in the same house in Escondido that I lived in since I was 8 years old, although I remodeled the house several times. Our son is a mechanical engineer in Murrieta. My daughter works for the Animal Humane Society in Escondido.

The funniest play I ever saw in our league happened five years ago. Ernie Martinez was playing 3rd base and Jim Teeter hit a ball to right field with a runner on first. The runner headed for 3rd and the throw came in toward Ernie who was not paying attention but at the last minute threw his glove at the ball. The ball hit the glove, popped up into Ernie's hand, and he almost threw Teeter out at 2nd. Teeter wanted extra bases for Ernie throwing the glove and I yelled back: "Give him all of 'em. It's worth it."

My only advice to anyone in our league is not to take anything that happens too seriously. Have fun while you can. It is alarming how quickly time goes.