

## Pro athletes pair well with wine

By DALE ROBERTSON Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle

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A friend recently asked me to give a talk about the role of wine and sports in American culture. My initial response was, "Huh?" Could there be two more disparate topics?

Except, once you think about it, you realize that the two circles are starting to overlap quite a bit.

Rockets owner Leslie Alexander's Leslie Wines got me to thinking about how much sports-wine interplay there is today. Even Joe Maddon, manager of the American League champion Tampa Bay Rays, keeps a fully stocked mini wine cooler in his office. (Can't picture Casey Stengel sipping a merlot, can you?) And the Rays' vice president of baseball operations, ex-Astro general manager Gerry Hunsicker, is himself a serious collector who converses as knowledgeably on cabernet as he does pitching prospects.

A whole raft of superstar PGA golfers, larger-than-life race-car drivers, Super Bowl ring-wearing quarterbacks, coaches, general managers and a certain unretired Tour de France champion round out the field.

Arnold Palmer. Greg Norman. Ernie Els. David Frost. Luke Donald. Mario Andretti. Jeff Gordon. Joe Montana. Carmen Policy. Mike Ditka. Dick

Vermeil. John Madden. They all have their names, or variations thereof, on labels. (Madden, who became more famous as a broadcaster than a coach despite his Super Bowl championships with the Raiders, owns a syrah vineyard in California's Livermore Valley.) In Lance Armstrong's case, his just-released 2005 cab is called Cuvée 7, celebrating his unprecedented seven Tour de France titles, the last of which he claimed in '05.

Having acquired a taste for Super Tuscans when he was living in Italy, during the pre-cancer chapter of his cycling career, Armstrong is collaborating with Randy Lewis, one of Napa's most respected vintners and a former pro race-car driver who also cycles seriously.

The jocks themselves exert varying degrees of control over the offerings that carry their well-branded names. Some unquestioningly accept what's made on their behalf; others fashion themselves as quasi-vintners.

Joe Briggs of the low-production, high-quality August Briggs Winery may handle the winemaking for Gordon's wines, but the NASCAR legend flies to Napa from North Carolina at least once a year to ensure the juice is jibing with his palate.

"When we first met, we did quite a few tastings," Briggs says. "I could tell he knew and understood higher-end wines, and he had a very good idea what he liked stylistically. He's opinionated about what he likes, and so am I, but our relationship works."

No jokes here. Gordon's wines don't taste like

beer or smell like gasoline and, like many other jock-genre offerings, they are priced as seriously as they drink. The cab, for example, sells for \$74.75 at Spec's.

As for Montana and Policy, his ex-GM, it probably stood to reason they would wind up chasing glory through the grape, too. You can't live in San Francisco for long and not become enchanted with the wine country.

For Montana, it was love at first sight. He and his wife, Jennifer, bought a ranch with a vineyard in Sonoma's Knight's Valley not long after he retired and, inevitably, took the plunge — although his mission is more charitable than commercial. Much of his Montagia, a heady cab blend from Howell Mountain fruit crafted by Ed Sbragia, Beringer's winemaker for 30-plus years until he retired in January, goes to charitable causes.

Policy's ambitions, in contrast, are 100 percent commercial. After winning five Super Bowls with the 49ers — four with Montana — he's aiming high in wine, too. His first Casa Piena, from grapes grown on nine acres of prime Yountville soil purchased from Charles Krug, is slated for release in the spring. With hot young winemaker Thomas Brown in the cellar, Policy believes he has "put the right pieces together" for it to become a cult classic — the next Scarecrow, he hopes.

But winemaking is like franchise-building, and he says, "You can only pray that things line up in your favor."

A sampling of sports celebrities whose wines are available in Houston (Spec's prices):

- David Frost, golfer: a variety of whites and reds (\$18-\$35)
- Luke Donald, golfer: cabernet (\$38.39)
- Arnold Palmer, golfer: chardonnay (\$10.60)
- Ernie Els, golfer: red blend (\$79.37)
- Greg Norman, golfer: chardonnay (\$11.19)
- Jeff Gordon, NASCAR driver: chardonnay (\$47.36), cabernet (\$74.75)

[dale.robertson@chron.com](mailto:dale.robertson@chron.com)