

# Watches of fortune

*Based in Hollywood, Watch-U-Want has become one of the 'big boys' in the world of online luxury-watch retailers.*

BY SIOBHAN MORRISSEY  
Special to the Miami Herald

O.J. Whatley owes a lot to Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher. They helped him purchase his first Rolex and eventually led to his founding Watch-U-Want, a Hollywood company that bills itself as the “largest purchaser and reseller of the highest quality preowned luxury watches and timepieces worldwide.”

“He is one of the main big boys,” says Joe Accar of Accar Limited, the Miami-based jeweler who buys from and sells to Watch-U-Want more than \$100,000 worth of watches every year.

What began as a bedroom business for Whatley in 1999 has expanded to a company with 21 employees, including an in-house certified master watchmaker to make repairs, a quality control department dedicated to ensuring the watches are clean and in good working order, and a photographer who highlights the assets of each watch for the company’s predominantly internet clientele. According to Whatley, his sales team racks up \$15 million in annual revenue and has a client list that includes celebrities and CEOs, including Doc McGhee, who managed KISS, Bon Jovi and Mötley Crüe.

It all started when O.J. — whose initials stand for Orin Judd — appeared on *Wheel of Fortune* back in 1989, back when he was a freshman at the University of Miami. The clue was “Fictional Characters.” It took him a little more than two minutes and seven spins to identify the Mark Twain characters and figure out the puzzle.



LISA SMITH/WATCH-U-WANT

**TIME TO SPARE:** Watch-U-Want business founder O.J. Whatley shows off some of his watches.

“You didn’t make it a secret when you figured out what it was,” Pat Sajak said, laughing at Whatley’s fist pumps and whoop. “You went mildly bananas out here. But that’s good. You deserve to.”

Whatley had just won \$2,400 in cash and a \$4,500 gift certificate to a Beverly

Hills jewelry store, where he later purchased two stainless steel Rolex Submariner watches — one for himself, the other for his father, Bob. Each Rolex cost \$2,100 at the time.

“Interestingly enough, I could sell that watch right now for five grand,” Whatley said. “Which is really in-

teresting, because at the time, I could have bought the Tag Heuer Sports Elegance Link Watch for the same kind of money, around \$2,100. And that watch today is worth about 500 bucks.” The Sports Elegance had a band that looked like a jigsaw puzzle and was considered the “Holy Grail” for col-

lege students to own, he said, “but instead I got the Rolex, because I just felt like it was a cooler watch, less fashion and more like a watch that I could have for the rest of my life.”

While fully aware of his Rolex watch’s value as a commodity, he maintains that it retains far greater

sentimental value. As a buyer of luxury watches for the past quarter century, Whatley is well aware that watches not only mark time, but also the special occasions in life.

Both he and his father still own their *Wheel of Fortune* watches, and Bob loves to look down at his as he tells strangers how his son eventually went on to win another \$10,000 — and the game. He was a hairsbreadth away from driving away in a red convertible BMW — if only he could fill in the remaining blanks on the bonus puzzle:

D-A- \_ D-R-E-A- \_ - \_ N- \_ .

While *Wheel of Fortune* helped him purchase his first serious watches, Whatley says he was always interested in watches, even as a young boy.

“I remember growing up, I used to love the Star Wars watches — the R2D2, the Darth Vader helmet, the CP30,” he says. “I wore them as necklaces. When I was 12, my mom got me a Casio Tone Watch that played *Happy Birthday* and *Hang Down Your Head Tom Dooley*. There was like 13 songs it played. This was right about the time that you had the calculator watches, but the calculator watches were a little dorky for me. So, I wanted the Casio Tone Watch.”

Whatley remains on the hunt for the coolest watches, as is evident from the company store room and vault. He specializes in sports watches in the \$2,500 to \$12,500 range, with \$8,500 being the sweet spot. Of course, if you want to splurge, there are more expensive models available. There’s the DeWitt “Jackie

•TURN TO WATCHES, 5G

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Chan” watch for \$79,995 (only five made, and it comes in 18-karat white gold, with a red skeleton dial, retails for \$265,000); an Audemars Piguet Jules Audemars “Star Wheel 2 Faces” pocket watch for \$114,995 (has a platinum case and from an edition of 50); or the Audemars Piguet AP Royal Oak Tourbillon Chronograph for \$139,995 (a bargain, considering it retails for \$225,600).

In addition to the watches, Whatley makes an effort to preserve the provenance of the watches he sells by matching the serial numbers on the watches to warranty documents. This helps establish the authenticity of the watches in a world where fakes abound.

His typical client buys three to five watches a year and will often resell a watch bought from Watch-U-Want back to the company. In an unusually open manner, his customers often provide their full names, email addresses and telephone numbers in addition to their feedback about their experiences with Whatley and his company.

“He’s a man of his word, honest,” Accar told the Miami Herald in a telephone interview.

Adam Rosenblum, vice president of marketing for the upscale senior living residence The Palace, agrees and keeps coming back for more. Rosenblum says he has bought 25 watches from Watch-U-Want over the past decade and has traded or sold others. They met through a friend of a friend and eventually became good friends — especially after Whatley introduced Rosenblum to his future wife.

“He got me excited about new watch brands, expanded my horizons about new watches that are available,” Rosenblum says, explaining that he has bought Panerai, Bedat, Audemars Piguet and Rolex watches from his friend.



PHOTOS BY LISA SMITH/WATCH-U-WANT

**COOL STUFF:** O.J. Whatley’s desk is a testament to his ongoing love for Panerai, which outfits Italy’s frogmen. Besides the diver’s mask and the statuette of a frogman, the items include books and a miniature replica of a submarine.

“I bought a vintage Rolex Steve McQueen, named after the actor,” he says. “I bought it more as an investment, and it’s appreciated in value — and the funny thing is, I just wear it. Most people wouldn’t know what it was, but it’s a very special piece. O.J. will come across those, and if he sees anything that I would be interested in, he’ll let me know.”

The Rolex Steve McQueen is the rugged kind of sports watch that appeals to Whatley.

He often goes for Formula One speed, selling Ferrari and Maserati watches. He even has an Aston Martin watch that will remotely start your car. That’s the Jaeger-LeCoultre AMVOX2 DBS Transponder watch.

Sometimes the boxes the watches come in are as intriguing as the watch itself, as is the case with the Pierre Kunz Insanity Watch, which has a box set designed to resemble a straightjacket.

The Corum Bubble Casino watch comes in a box done up to look like a roulette table with a green background and red and black numbers on which to place a bet. The Lamborghini Blancpain Super Trofeo comes in a gray carbon fiber box that resembles the hood of the sports car and is lined with Alcantara sueded leather, the same material used for Lamborghini seats.

Knowing that a complete box set increases the value of any watch he sells, Whatley is always on the lookout for such boxes. He will hang on to the boxes until he finds the matching watch and sell them as a set for more than he could get for the individual pieces.

His storeroom is filled with boxes made of burl, alligator skin, tooled leather, and even the neoprene worn by deep-sea divers. Only Rolex eschews the glamorous presentation,

opting instead for a simple lime-green box with the company’s signature crown logo.

“Rolex hasn’t done anything with its presentation,” Whatley says. “They don’t need to.”

Conversely, Panerai, the only watch company that Rolex ever teamed up with, created some of the most alluring box sets, with a miniature anchor and a special tool for changing out the watch straps, which are included in the sale.

Whatley has a soft spot for Panerai. Not only did his clients go crazy for the watch after seeing Sylvester Stallone wear one in the adventure movie *Daylight*, but also the watch played a big role in helping Whatley finance his company.

The idea of starting an Internet-based watch resale company first came to mind when he sold the watch he bought to commemorate his wedding — a Girard-Perre-



**WATCH FOR LUXURY:** Among the high-end watches the company sells is this pre-owned Richard Mille “Flyback Chrono,” which carries a \$79,995 price tag and has a warranty and a titanium case.

## Watch-U-Want

**Company headquarters:** Hollywood

**CEO:** O.J. Whatley

**President:** Shannon Beck

**Incorporated:** 2001

**Employees:** 21

**Annual revenues:** \$15 million

**Watch brands sold:** Panerai, Audemars Piguet, Bell & Ross, Blancpain, Breitling, Bulgari, Cartier, Chopard, Corum, Dewitt, Franck Muller, Girard-Perregaux, Hublot, IWC, Jaeger-LeCoultre, Omega, Patek Philippe, Richard Mille, Roger Dubuis, Rolex, Ulysse Nardin, Vacheron, Zenith

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gaux Ferrari Chronograph — and made a \$400 profit shortly after returning from the honeymoon. (And yes, he is still married, having celebrated his 15th anniversary last month.) That \$400, later combined with a tax refund, would help fund Watch-U-Want.

But Panerai indirectly provided most of the seed money. While working as the director of sales for a Broward-based software company in the early 2000s, Whatley became enamored of the Panerai watches and read everything he could get his hands on about the timepieces. He became an expert in the watches and joined a Panerai chat room and would take calls from anyone interested in learning about or buying such watches. During that time, he also learned that some

people would pay as much as \$150 for books that Panerai published about its watches.

“I found out you could call Panerai on their 1-800 number in New York, and they’d send you out these books for free,” he says. “So I had everyone at the software company ordering these books. And I was selling them on eBay, and that became my seed capital.” He used the money to buy watches for resale and to build his website.

His desk is a testament to Whatley’s ongoing love for all things Panerai, which outfits Italy’s frogmen with illuminated watches. A statuette of an Italian frogman dressed completely in black decorates the desk, as does a miniature replica of the submarines the early frogmen would swim beside.