

Larger than life

With billion-dollar box office hauls and adoring fans in every corner of the globe, **Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson** swapped WWE for a shot at Hollywood with ease and aplomb – or at least he makes it look that way, writes Harold von Kursk

With unbridled positivity that is as much a part of his image as his massive physique, Dwayne Johnson has morphed into one of the world's most popular celebrities.

Having overcome poverty, a career-ruining injury and a depression that left him "crying by myself on my sofa and feeling that my life was finished", Johnson reinvented himself as a wildly popular wrestler known as The Rock. Then he parlayed that notoriety into a movie career that has seen him become Hollywood's top action star.

This summer, the 47-year-old Johnson has upped the ante yet again with his new film, *Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw*, starring Johnson alongside Jason Statham and Idris Elba. On one Hollywood Saturday afternoon in mid-July, thousands of fans gathered on the famous Boulevard to greet Johnson at the film's world premiere. True to form, he arrived on the red carpet in an old, battered tow truck which is consistent with his down-to-earth mantra of never forgetting his humble origins.

Following a 2016 Forbes article which was the first time Johnson was ranked as the highest-paid actor on earth with \$65m in annual earnings – he ranked 2nd in 2018 at \$124m – he was quick to take to Instagram to offer a cautionary

note to his legions of social media followers which now number more than 140 million. "Don't ever forget where you came from," he wrote.

"I was evicted at 14 years old and completely broke by 23. Every day I wake up as if that eviction notice is right around the corner waiting for me, which is why I always say, 'the wolf is always scratchin' at the door'. He's scratchin' cause he's hungry and never satisfied. We embrace and respect our past (even if it was f---ed up), but we never let it define our future. Let's stay hungry and chase that greatness."

That single-minded pursuit of success is what has guided him to the kind of career enjoyed by another muscle-bound, former bodybuilder – Arnold Schwarzenegger who was Dwayne's idol. In the year 2000, however, Johnson began his Hollywood quest with only his pro-wrestling persona as his calling card.

Armed with the same kind of innate self-belief and bravado that propelled Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone to studio stardom in the 80s, it was Johnson's turn to take up their mantle. "It was always my dream to be an actor", he said.

"Watching *Rocky* changed my life and that (Stallone) character became my role model. I got into wrestling because that was a family tradition and thought it would be a good way of making

a name for myself that one day could lead to Hollywood."

But it wasn't a smooth ride. At the beginning, he faced constant rejection and even ridicule from casting agents who had a hard time figuring out a niche for the hulking ex-wrestler. Johnson had to keep knocking on doors and it wasn't until 2010 and his starring role in *The Tooth Fairy* that he began to gain a greater measure of recognition for his comic gifts and engaging personality.

"Half-Samoan and half-black, it wasn't as if there was a blueprint I could follow," Johnson observed. "But you don't let yourself get discouraged by that. You keep on fighting and waiting for the next opportunity."

Johnson has done exactly that. After establishing himself as an action hero in *G.I. Joe Retaliation* [2013] and *Hercules* [2014], the latter of which was a mild disappointment at the box-office, his bankability soared after latching onto the last four *Fast & Furious*

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Right: Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson at the *Rampage* Premiere at the Microsoft Theater in Los Angeles in April 2018

movies. While the eighth installment – *The Fate of The Furious* – topped the billion-dollar mark at the box-office, Johnson recognised that his recurring role as FBI agent Luke Hobbs had begun to outstrip that of his *Furious* co-star Vin Diesel.

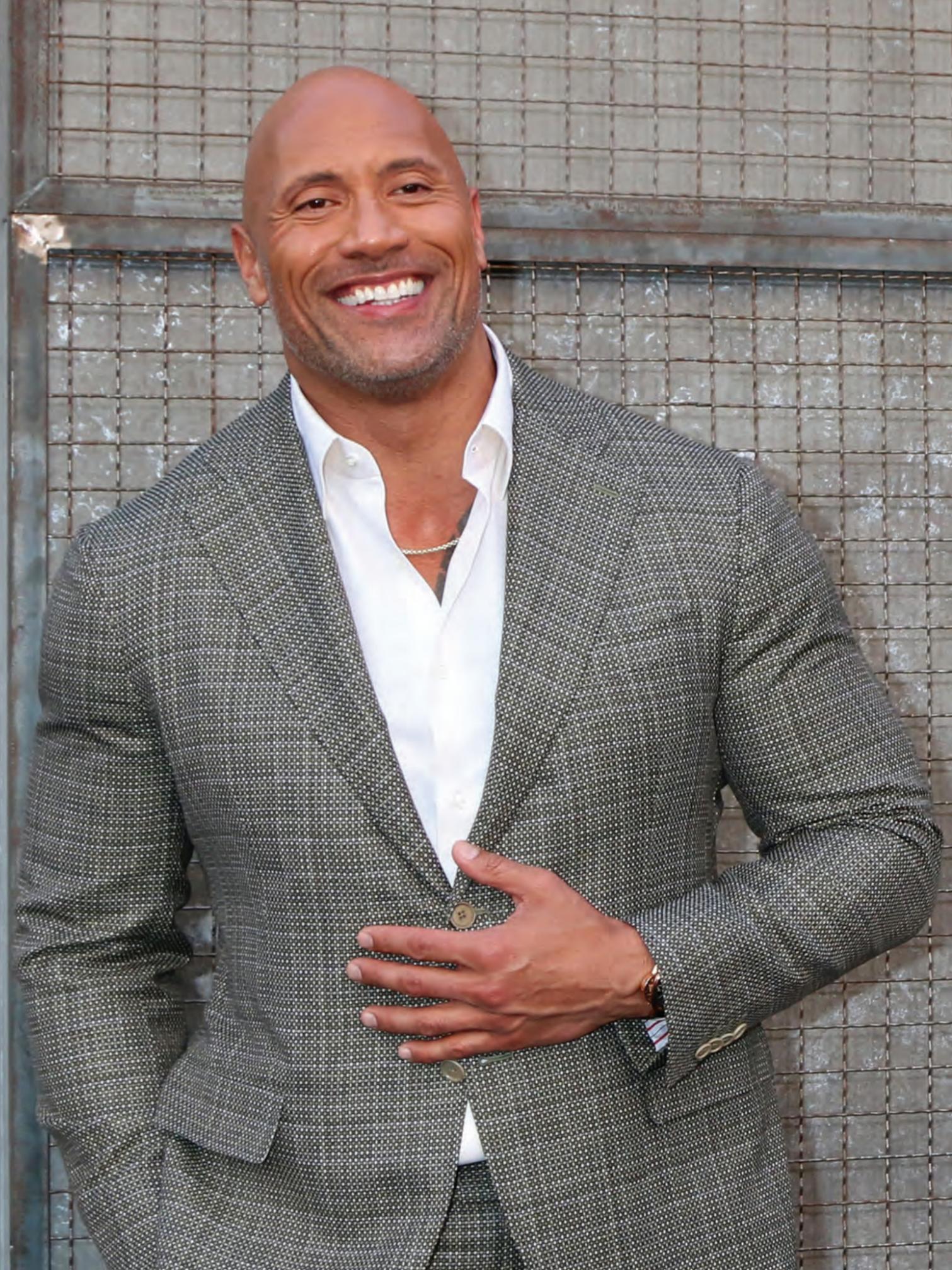
"Audiences loved the biting kind of chemistry between Hobbs and Shaw in the *Furious* films," Johnson said.

"So we thought it would be great to make a film where we could really exploit that chemistry. We sat down with Universal [Studios] and said, 'Okay, this is the right opportunity and this feels like the right creative inroad. Now let's go make a great movie that the world will enjoy.'"

That is the kind of spirit that Johnson brings. And it's not an act. Anyone who has ever heard Johnson speak in person cannot fail to be impressed by his charismatic élan. He knows how dark the world can look when one hits rock bottom, and he wants his fans to take solace and inspiration from the way he bounced back.

"Fortunately I had some good friends who helped me regain my spirit and confidence and I swore to myself that I would never feel sorry for myself again. I decided that I was going to look at life in the most positive and optimistic way possible and try to help other people feel that they can accomplish their dreams too."

Over the last 25 years, he has never wavered from that philosophy. His implacable self-confidence is what made him persevere in spite of the ridicule and rejection that ➤





greeted his first attempts to gain a foothold in the film industry.

"I always knew I had the ability to draw people towards me and create a bond with the public... [but] trying to find work in Hollywood, I had that scratch and claw mentality where you just keep pushing and fighting until you get one job, then the next, and keep moving forward," Johnson recalled.

"When I first got into the business, I made a vow and a pact to myself that I was going to understand the business from top to bottom. I really wanted to be a sponge and I didn't give a [damn] if it was overwhelming. Bring it on. I got one shot at this."

Johnson envisioned the day when he might one day become a Hollywood legend on his own

Above: Tyrese Gibson with Dwayne Johnson at the premiere of *Furious 7*
Right: Johnson on set with actress Carla Gugino filming earthquake disaster movie *San Andreas* in 2015

terms and where he would not be seen as one-dimensional.

"I wanted to build my own little empire, but I also worked very hard to become an actor and find films where I could reach people on an

emotional level. I'm a very emotional guy and I had a lot of problems earlier in my life when I tried to hide that. But after going through a divorce I knew that I had to become a more open and vulnerable man and that kind of thing has also not only made me a much better man but a much better actor."

Everywhere that Johnson goes, fans flock towards him. He loves to engage with people directly and impart any wisdom or encouragement that might resonate with those who have come to identify with his personal ardour and uplifting sensibility. He believes that it's his emotional side that that has allowed him to connect with the public in such a powerful way.

"When you're not afraid of your feelings and worries and being able to express yourself to the people you love it just transforms you in so many great ways," Johnson says.

"You begin to enjoy your own spirit and everything about yourself that allows you to connect with the people you love just as

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I think audiences are able to sense something about me and that I can be just as vulnerable as I can be tough."

Johnson credits football and a passion for body-building for giving him self-belief and helping him carve out a new identity that he says "is the basis for everything I've accomplished." As a young boy growing up in Hawaii, Dwayne had several brushes with the law and difficulty dealing with authority. His father and grandfather were professional wrestlers, and their brand of violent bravado filtered into Johnson's belligerent personality and bad attitude. After his family relocated to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Johnson enrolled ▶





at Freedom High School where he was a regular visitor to the principal's office. One day Johnson decided to take advantage of the urinal in the teachers' lounge. After a run-in with Jody Cwik, the football coach, who told the already hulking student, "You need to get the fuck out of here," Johnson paid no heed as he took his time washing his hands before leaving.

But Cwik's voice and stern manner reminded him of his Samoan elders who "would beat your ass if you didn't show the proper respect".

"I apologised for being such a punk," Johnson recalled.

"I didn't want to be that kid. He shook my hand and wouldn't let go. Crushing handshake. And he looked in my eyes and said, 'Son, I want you to come out and play football for me.' That was the day everything changed."

Coach Cwik sat me down and said, 'Listen, your family doesn't have any money. Your grades are average. If you're going to get out of this town and make a different life

for yourself, football is the vehicle.' Suddenly I had a chance to become the first person in my family to go to college. I became obsessed with making it."

Johnson fell in love with the game and earned a college scholarship to the University of Miami where he played defensive end. But several knee injuries that required surgery took its toll on him and he wound up signing with the Calgary Stampeders of Canadian Football League after going undrafted by the NFL. He was cut from the squad after only two months, however, effectively ending his pro football career, and forced to go back to Florida and stay at his parents' home in Tampa. All he had to show for his life was a bag of clothes and \$7 in his wallet. That was also the beginning of Dwayne Johnson's resurrection.

Today, Johnson runs his own film company named Seven Bucks

Above left: Johnson with his daughter, Jasmine Above right: With his Samoan mother, Ata

Entertainment in Fort Lauderdale with Dany Garcia, his long-time manager, ex-wife, and childhood sweetheart with whom he has a 17-year-old daughter, Simone. They stayed close after a divorce in 2008 and she remains his closest professional confidante.

"His drive isn't any different than when I met him when he was 18 years old," said Garcia.

"He was born that way. He's going to die that way, if he ever dies. But he's always had this level of excitement to do more. Like, 'What else can we bring?'"

Their production company recently produced the low-budget film, *Fighting With My Family*, revolving around a young woman's attempt to break into pro wrestling in which Johnson has a supporting role. The movie grossed an impressive \$40m earlier this year, and is merely a harbinger for more projects that Johnson would like to develop from scratch.

"I always say that the audience is my only boss, other than my lady at home."

That woman is his girlfriend of 14 years, Lauren Hashian. They live together in Los Angeles with their four-year-old, Jasmine, and one-year-old, Tiana.

A committed father, Johnson also wants his children to be proud of their father's Polynesian ancestry. That's why Johnson is eager to begin work next year on *The King*, acclaimed director Robert Zemeckis's planned historical drama about Hawaiian King Kamehameha. (Johnson's mother is of Samoan descent, his father is a Canadian from Nova Scotia). The film would be the fulfilment of yet another of Johnson's dreams. Several years ago, he was honoured by Samoa and named a High Chief, a title his grandfather Peter Maivia once held.

"That's the highest title you can have bestowed on you by the king.

"Fifty thousand people were gathered for the ceremony which was very long and very spiritual.

"It was an amazing day and experience for me." ■