

'I changed the way the collecting world works'

When you walk through the doors into the Auto Exotica exhibit at the Canadian International Auto Show (it's on Level 100 of the Metro Toronto Convention Centre's north building), the first thing you see on your left, up against a wall, is a display of colourful auto racing crash helmets, driver uniforms and racing gloves and shoes.

Called the Hall of Fame Collection, it is an absolutely mind-boggling assortment of motorsport memorabilia. What started out as a hobby for its curator has become a successful business with spinoffs. (Before I go any further here, I want to stress that the Hall of Fame Collection is a private business and has no connection with the nearby Canadian Motorsport Hall of Fame display that features a red 1986 Lola that was raced in the CART championship that season by the legendary Mario Andretti.)

The for-profit Hall of Fame Collection belongs to an English immigrant named Darren Jack. Jack is 39 now and has been in love with auto racing since he was 4, when he saw his first Grand Prix in Italy.

"We went to the San Marino Grand Prix and someone had left a Ferrari flag on the floor near where I was standing," he told me this week at the Auto Show, which closes to the public at 6 p.m. Sunday.

"The race ended and no one came back to claim it, so my dad let me take it. It was my first motorsport souvenir and the interesting thing about that



The Star's Norris McQuinn and Hall of Fame Collection owner Darren Jack with Max Verstappen's steering wheel.

flag is that it had Gilles Villeneuve and his Ferrari racing car on it."

Jack keeps his collection, which is worth serious, serious money, in his southern Ontario home. Some of it is on display at the Paddock Club in Burlington (an exclusive, members-only facility catering to motorsport families while other times it's taken to celebrations, such as the annual Auto Show where, for a price, anybody can walk away with a piece of motor racing history. If you're a fan, you find yourself behaving like a kid in a candy store when you walk into the Hall of Fame Collection. Here's a race suit worn by James Hinchcliffe. Over there are helmets belonging to Nigel Mansell, Scott Dixon and Fer-

nando Alonso. See those tiny red shoes? They were worn by Sebastian Vettel and let me say that the four-time world champion sure has little feet.

Jack has trophies and other memorabilia on display - and for sale - at the Auto Show. One thing in particular caught my eye: the steering wheel of the Red Bull raced last season by Max Verstappen. Every item in the collection has been either race-worn or used in a race. Everything is autographed and authenticated as to its legitimacy.

After he made off with the Ferrari flag in Italy and spirited it home to Preston, Lancashire, in the U.K., Jack started collecting in earnest. He started keeping programs and getting

autographs from the drivers of the day.

"I loved taking photographs and I got the drivers to sign them," he said. "And they would start asking me, 'Where did you get this picture?' and I would say, 'Well, I took it; and they would say, 'Can I get one?' and I'd say, 'Of course,' and I would get them a print."

"These were the days before Facebook and Google and they would ask for a photograph and I'd give them one and they'd say, 'What can I do for you?' and so they'd give me a pair of old gloves, or a visor.

"Then I'd perhaps trade something with another collector and I'd pay attention to what they were looking for. If something that I knew some one was looking for showed up, I'd buy it and sell it to them. Some collectors don't want to part with things but I think you have to in order to grow your collection."

And he has capitalized on personal relationships that have built up as the result of his collecting activities. He did some work trying to find sponsorship for James Hinchcliffe and is working with another IndyCar driver these days, Alexander Rossi. While he has an appreciation of NASCAR drivers, "I focus on Formula One, IndyCar and sports car racers and that keeps me pretty busy."

Jack says that right now, today, his is probably the world's largest motorsport memorabilia collection. He has 500 helmets, with a couple of hundred available for sale. He estimates he has about 300 race-used suits and he's always trying to match up the driver's gloves and boots.

"I think I changed the way the

collecting world works," he said. "I was the first one to decide that I was going to collect Nigel Mansell's helmet, with his racing suit, his gloves and his boots. A lot of collectors couldn't figure out what they were collecting. I said, if we can get the full set, that's his kit, you know, and so a lot of the high-end collectors now are after the whole thing."

He says the most popular items he sells are the helmets. "People like the helmets because they can put them in their office. They're a great way to start a conversation, to break the ice."

And does he have anything he would never sell? That would be part of his collection forever? "Yes," he said. "There are many items I wouldn't sell."

"Let's start with my Indianapolis 500 winning drivers collection. I have managed to obtain an original worn helmet and suit from every Indy 500 winner from 1957-2018. I even have three earlier than that dating back to Louis Meyer's driving 'hat' from the late 1920s.

"I'm very proud of my suit from 1911 Indy 500 pole sitter Lewis Strang. And I have 13 of

(the late) Dan Wheldon's helmets and I'll always have one of those with me until the day I die. Same with Scott Dixon's, as he gave me that one (which is on display) a long time ago and it means much more to me than any I have bought.

"He's a good friend of mine and I'm super proud of how well he has done on and off the track."