

Daymond John is

The *Shark Tank* star, FUBU founder, and best-selling author says he has refocused his energy on his family, friends, and health. If only he weren't still tirelessly working every angle.

BY **Kevin J. Ryan**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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GONE FISHIN'



DAYMOND JOHN HOOKS A LIVE SQUID onto a fishing line and casts into the Pacific. It's early in Los Angeles. His sunglasses reflect the last remnants of the morning fog. Fishing has been one of John's favorite pastimes since he was a kid, something he still makes time for while juggling *Shark Tank* appearances, investing in startups, and running the apparel brand FUBU, which he created as a young hustler in Queens, New York, back in the '90s.

Holding the rod with one hand, he flashes the face of his Apple Watch. His Sleep app reveals that he slept for three hours and seven minutes last night—a decent amount, he says, but less than his preferred four hours. I didn't sleep much longer, but I'm exhausted to the point of nausea while he's wide awake. The colorful line graph illustrating his sleep cycle shows he was restless for the second half of the night. He's convinced that if he'd hit the gym when he got back to his hotel at midnight, he would've slept more soundly.

The California coastline rises and falls through the haze while John reels in a fish, then another, and then another, most of them too small to keep. As the morning sun emerges and beats down on us, I log my first and only catch of the day—and start to feel hot saliva forming in my mouth. While the captain unhooks my fish, I move to the far side of the boat ... and throw up my breakfast into the ocean. John doesn't see this, but when I sit next to him a few minutes later, glistening with cold sweat, he takes a look at me. "You good?"

I tell him what just happened, and he bursts out laughing. "We're putting you through the ringer," he says. "Welcome to the life!"

This is the world of Daymond John—always moving, never dull. Since his daughter's birth in 2016 and his thyroid cancer diagnosis the following year, John has been less involved with FUBU's day-to-day and more focused on family and health. Recently he cut back on drinking and began watching his diet. He walks an astounding 25,000 steps most days. The 53-year-old is more conscious of his work-life balance—and more aware of his mortality.

But that doesn't mean he's slowed down. For him, a more balanced life looks like this: taping *Shark Tank* and advising the founders in his portfolio; working on a soon-to-launch podcast he's hosting; trying to develop a scripted miniseries; a (top secret) appearance on *The Masked Singer*; throwing an event for Black entrepreneurs in New York City; and appearances at more than a dozen business events across the country, including the Inc. 5000 Conference & Gala. That's just a one-month span in early fall. As I would learn after spending one sleep-deprived weekend with him, it's a lifestyle that's too much to handle for a healthy person two decades his junior.

Back on the boat, we're about to head to shore when John finally nabs a calico bass that's a keeper. He unhooks it and it falls to the deck. He scrambles to grab it, but it slips through a drain and into the ocean. "That's OK," he declares. "I'm gonna catch a bigger



John, a sport-fishing aficionado, catches a calico bass (previous spread) near Marina del Rey, California (above).

one right now." He tosses his line back into the water. Less than a minute later, his rod starts to bend. It's a beauty: a sand bass, 20 inches and a solid seven pounds—a keeper. The boat's staff ooh and aah. "I told you!" he announces. They offer to prepare it for him, but he pulls on a pair of gloves, sets the fish down on a flat surface, grabs a knife, and fillets it himself.

Which shouldn't come as any surprise to anyone who knows Daymond John.

NONE OF THIS WAS PART OF THE PLAN. I was supposed to meet John in Miami, the city he now calls home with his wife, Heather, and their 6-year-old daughter, Minka. They recently moved to Miami full time from New York's Catskill Mountains so Minka could start first grade there. John is still the CEO of FUBU, but fashion is a fickle business, and the company has shrunk since its late '90s peak, when it did \$350 million in annual revenue. His work there now revolves mostly around partnerships and licensing deals. John made a full recovery from his cancer scare, during which he had a Stage II growth and half his thyroid removed. It was a frightening experience, especially with a new baby at home. He's down 40 pounds this year and says he feels great. I was to visit John in his newly restructured world and observe how he's stepping back from the chaos of founder life.

That was the plan, at least. Ten minutes after I checked into my South Beach hotel, John called me from Los Angeles and explained that a tropical storm—

INSPIRATION FOR JOHN CAN COME FROM ANY CHANCE MEETING, ANY INTERACTION.

which later became Hurricane Ian—was due to hit Florida in a few days; if he flew home, he might not be able to make it back to California for a speaking engagement early the next week. The call ended with John deciding he was staying in L.A.

When I finally meet up with John at his hotel in Beverly Hills nearly 24 hours later, I walk in just as family time—the remote version—is beginning. Heather and Minka appear on the screen of John's tablet computer, and Minka calls out her dad for being late. "I was *five minutes* late," he protests. Father and daughter play a series of games, including a memory game and a collaborative jigsaw puzzle. At the end of their 15 minutes together, John explains to her how he was supposed to be there this weekend, but can't be. "Daddy's gonna see you in just 10 days," he says.

"Whaaat?" she asks.

"I know," John says, and then tries to raise her spirits by reminding her that she can build sandcastles with her new beach toys.

John is determined to learn from the mistakes of his first marriage. He and his ex-wife, with whom he has two daughters now in their 20s, divorced in 2003. He admits he wasn't around as much as he should have been, that there wasn't any semblance of balance. These days he's almost as busy, but if there's a gap on his calendar, he'll fly home across time zones to see his wife and daughter, even if it's for as little as a few hours.

Growing up in the working class community of Hollis, Queens, John learned lessons from each of his parents, albeit vastly different ones. His father was a computer programmer with a mathematical mind. John has described him as both absent and manipulative. He and John's mother divorced when John was 12. Even at that age, he says he knew he didn't want to see his dad again—and he told him as much. The two cut off all communication, and John separated himself from his father's entire side of the family.

His mother, meanwhile, was his rock. She kept a watchful eye. At a time when crack was ravaging American cities, she made drugs seem uncool by offering to try them with him. "I could've been a crackhead all by myself, but she ruined that for me," he jokes. She also gave John a valuable piece of advice: Your day job won't make you rich; your homework will.

John's day job in 1992 was as a server at Red Lobster. That's when he decided to try to replicate a winter hat he'd seen in a music video. It's also the start of the founding legend of FUBU, now a part of startup lore. Using the sewing skills his mom taught him, John created a batch of hats and offered them for \$20 apiece in front of a local mall. They sold out in a few hours. Suspecting he was on to something, he came up with a brand name—an acronym for For Us, By Us—brought aboard three friends from the neighborhood, and started slapping the FUBU logo onto shirts, hoodies, and hockey jerseys. John's mother let him and his partners use the house as their headquarters.

John is convinced that FUBU's early scrappiness

was directly correlated with its success. Growing up, he and his mom lived off food stamps and had their electricity cut from time to time. He dumpster dived and rebuilt bicycles as a side hustle. In FUBU's early days, the co-founders got the word out in part by approaching neighborhood stores and offering to pay them \$200 to repaint their graffiti-covered metal pull-down gates with the FUBU logo. Three hundred establishments throughout Queens agreed.

At the time, the area around Hollis was home to hip-hop artists including Run DMC, a Tribe Called Quest, and LL Cool J. The FUBU founders leveraged that fact to hustle their clothes onto the heads and backs of some of the biggest stars of the moment. When they got invited onto the sets of music videos, they gave clothes to the artists just before the cameras started rolling. To date, the little clothing company from Hollis has earned more than \$8 billion in revenue.

In retrospect, it's easy to see how all the circumstances of John's upbringing added up to his particular brand of success. But in the moment, he couldn't have known. John learned from executive coach Jay Abraham, an early mentor with whom he's still close, that "everything in the world is a source of something that you can find and make work for you." It might be

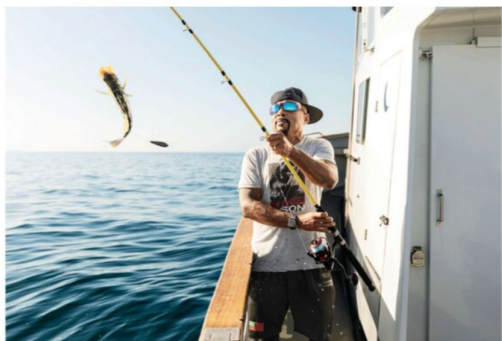


John's parents divorced when he was 12, and the future founder didn't speak to his father again until a few years ago. He credits his mother with encouraging him to pursue business and stay out of trouble.

that another brand's approach to marketing is an example for yours. Or a person you meet is a potential mentor. In any case, John says, "the key is how you find those untapped opportunities." It's something he has learned to do better than almost anyone else.

TO WALK ALONG THE PALM-LINED STREETS of Beverly Hills with Daymond John is to be recognized. If it's anonymity you seek, do not spend the day with the man. One woman asks for a photo with him, to which he politely obliges. "You're my favorite Shark!" yells a man walking with his son, and John talks with them for a moment about growing up in New York.

Dave Heath, co-founder of Bombas, a direct-to-consumer sock company that brings in more than \$100 million in annual revenue (John invested in



2014), marvels at John's habit of engaging with so many of the people who cross his path. It's a key aspect of John's formula for success. If you believe there's potential for opportunity in everything, then you have to experience as much as you can. "If I'm at a conference and there are other entrepreneurs there who are just starting up," Heath says, "I think about how much more inundated Daymond gets and remind myself that he would take the time to talk to this person."

At one point, during breakfast with a TV writer with whom he's collaborating, John gestures toward me and leans back in his seat. "You know what? I just want to watch you two talk about writing," he says.

While John gets recognized wherever he goes today, he didn't become a celebrity until he joined *Shark Tank* in 2009. Since then, fellow Shark Barbara Corcoran admits, he's succeeded more than any other Shark at turning his presence on the show into a personal brand. "He used the platform in a way that none of the rest of us were smart enough to do initially," she says.

Corcoran adds, "He's also the only one who judges people more sharply than I do." She recalls being won over by a contestant on the show, a baker who claimed to be living out of his car. She wanted to invest and asked John to go in with her. "Daymond said, 'I'll come in on the deal because you're asking me,'" recalls Corcoran, "but I'm telling you, Barbara, don't trust that guy." Corcoran, John, and the contestant agreed on terms but didn't sign any paperwork. Soon after, when the Sharks went to visit the founder, he turned out to not be homeless—and, in fact, had a team of lawyers working for him. They pulled out of the deal.

"Daymond said, 'I told you so,'" recalls Corcoran. "I couldn't believe it. How did he see that coming?"

The answer is John's life experience, a journey that has taken him from humble beginnings to the heights of business. Today, his social circle spans a similar range. Many of his childhood friends have been involved with his companies over the years. "He's got real, genuine friendships that he treasures with people up and down the socioeconomic chain," says Abraham. "He understands that you can learn

John attacks his hobbies with the same obsessive focus that led to his building an apparel brand that has done \$8 billion in sales.



HE'S TURNED HIS PRESENCE ON THE SHOW INTO A PERSONAL BRAND.



WEARING A BLACK SEQUINED SHIRT, a navy-blue Yankees cap, and a pair of diamond earrings, John walks toward the entrance of Craig's, a popular West Hollywood restaurant. A TMZ photographer asks for a photo, and John poses. Inside, seated across from John is his right-hand man, Chauncey Bell, a childhood friend who now serves as a marketing consultant at the Shark Group, the company John founded to provide consulting and infrastructure to his *Shark Tank* companies. Bell has been sending and receiving texts throughout the night. "We're good," he finally announces, adding that "it sounds pretty intimate."

"It" turns out to be the rapper Lil Wayne's 40th birthday party, our next stop. My first concern is my clothing: a baby-blue-and-green short-sleeve button-down I'd brought for Miami, a pair of baggy khakis, and white tennis shoes. John reads my mind. "We'll tell people you're my accountant," he cracks.

A few minutes later, we're on our way to a cozy Italian restaurant called the Nice Guy, where we find, at the center of a crowd in suits and cocktail dresses, Weezy himself, being serenaded by the R&B artist Keith Sweat. It's Sweat, I learn, who invited John to the party. He comes over after his set and embraces John, and the two speak for a few minutes. Then John scans the crowd for anyone else he might know. When he's satisfied, we're on our way again. Our entire appearance at the party lasts no more than 15 minutes.

John explains that he isn't a fan of formal meetings, instead choosing to visit places where those in his circles hang out. It's part of why he's always on the move, hitting various clubs and restaurants until well past midnight, despite not being the partier he once was. It's fun, but it's also good business.

The next morning, John and I meet for breakfast. It's 9 a.m. and he says he's already made a dozen phone calls and sent 60 emails. Such hyperactivity, he argues, is hardwired in him. "Even if I were to say I'm retiring and am gonna go fishing every day—well, you know I'd open a little fishing shop somewhere." He's noticed that on the various company boards he's joined in recent years, many of the other members are former entrepreneurs who couldn't sit still in retirement.

"As a founder, you put in 20 hours a day not for the money, but because you were passionate about it," he says. "It's hard to cut that mentality."

He has evolved in other ways over the years, though. John has never before revealed this publicly, but a few years ago, he decided he was ready to connect with his father's other children, two women about his older

wonderful things from anyone."

Like a lot of Black Americans, John learned the hard way that not everyone shares that belief. At the peak of FUBU's success, he bought several homes around the U.S. and lived in each for a few months at a time. Among them was a waterfront property in Massapequa, an upper-middle-class enclave on Long Island. One day, he found a note in his mailbox: "You can make all the money you want. But when you're drinking your 40s and listening to your rap, remember that you'll always be a n—." He sold the house not long after.

John manages to look back on incidents like that with equanimity. Racists and bigots, he believes, cost themselves the opportunity to grow, to learn new things about the world. "When you relate to people, you get way more out of life," he says.

In October, John will host the third iteration of Black Entrepreneurs Day at Harlem's Apollo Theater. The event will feature appearances from Venus Williams, Shaquille O'Neal, and Spike Lee, among others. John will award 10 Black entrepreneurs \$25,000 apiece and the opportunity to receive his mentorship. He founded the event in 2020, motivated by the civil unrest following the death of George Floyd. One of the images that has stuck with him from that summer is that of Black youths burning businesses in their neighborhoods. "A lot of these kids don't have hope," he says. "We attach ourselves to the things we see the most, and for a lot of kids, that's crime. But if you see people opening businesses, suddenly that becomes an option."

Never one to pursue an opportunity lightly, John authored a children's book, *Little Daymond Learns to Earn*, that will publish next year. In it, the main character wants to make money to buy a music poster, so he starts a small business with his friends. The book teaches saving, budgeting, and other financial concepts. John sees *Shark Tank* playing a similar role. Its time slot gives families something to do together on Friday nights, something that's at once entertaining, educational, and—he hopes—inspiring.

It's part of why John has published five other books about entrepreneurship, four of them bestsellers, and why he does things like show up, unannounced, at Inc. events to take questions from attendees. He says he feels a duty to share his life experiences, so others can benefit as he has.

"I WANT TO CONTINUE TO EMPOWER PEOPLE TO CHANGE THEIR LIVES."



daughters' ages. They had no idea the man they'd been watching on TV was their brother. John grew close enough to one that he attended her wedding. There, he spoke with his father for the first time in nearly 40 years. It was a decision that required the emotional maturity that's only come later in life. He now sees that in cutting out his father, he cut himself off from the chance to know him and understand some of his ways.

John hasn't followed up with his father since that day, but he doesn't wish him any ill will. "Life is life," he says. "It does what it does." If his dad had stuck around, he's realized, things would have been different—more structured, perhaps, more conventional, but not necessarily better. "I would've probably gone to college. If he had stayed, I probably wouldn't be who I am today." His father's leaving, John believes, opened a door. Little Daymond was able to experience the world he wanted to, to create the Daymond John that exists today. He sits with this thought for a moment,

In the early days of FUBU, John and his partners persuaded hip-hop stars such as LL Cool J (opposite page, right) to wear their gear.

as if pondering who he really is. Then he crisply moves to the next order of business.

"I want to stay healthy and be around to protect my wife, my family, my daughters, my mother, my ex-wife," he says. "That's my first priority. The second thing is that I want to continue to empower people to change their lives. While I have my health and my family has theirs, I've got to maximize this opportunity."

His phone rings. It's Ted Kingsbery, the Shark Group's president, calling for their daily check-in. Tomorrow, John will fly to San Francisco to give a talk at a conference, and then it's off to events in Virginia Beach and Phoenix and a *Good Morning America* taping in New York. When he's done with all that, his wife and daughter will be in Miami waiting for him. Maybe then he'll get to relax for a day or two, to walk along the beach and build sandcastles. But not yet. **Q**

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