

## Damon delights in the spotlight

By JEFF PASSAN The Kansas City Star

DETROIT - Hanging out of an old convertible as it idled on a red carpet, Johnny Damon looked comfortable. This is his scene now: a bubbly blonde better suited for "Entertainment Tonight" asking him questions about baseball as the sport tried to jazz up its All-Star Game festivities with a televised show.

With Damon, the questions quickly turned away from baseball to fashion. Damon sported a beautiful suit. It was tan, or camel, or khaki, or something like that. Damon beamed, then name-dropped.

"I'm wearing a Joseph Abboud suit," he said. "Joseph's been taking real good care of me."

Joseph? Joseph! Whither Johnny Damon, circa 1996?

Back then, he was a Kansas City Royal, a grinner more than sinner. With close-cropped hair, he sliced across the base paths and in the outfield, swinging a bat that by 2000 made him one of baseball's premier leadoff hitters.

Now, he's a cult figure. He grew hair to his shoulders. He is candid. He called himself and his Red Sox teammates "idiots." He won a World Series, Boston's first in 86 years. He wrote a tell-all book chronicling the divorce from his first wife, Angie Vannice, the mother of his 6-year-old twins. He married Michelle Damon, who angrily disputes rumors she used to be a stripper.

Designer suits are just the start of Damon's new persona, which was on full display over the All-Star break. **He was the host of the hottest party of the weekend, sponsored by *Stuff* magazine, where women - and, yes, men - crawled around hoping to get a glimpse of Damon.**

Attention bombards Damon these days, and he's not one to turn it away.

"I enjoy it," said Damon, 31. "I know I have this responsibility. If you asked me would I rather be in my room or down here, I'd rather be in my room."

Doing what?

"C'mon, man," Damon said. "I just got married."

Damon always was charming. That's part of his allure: He talks in sound bites for radio stations, pontificates for newspaper reporters and opens up his life for everyone.

"I know there is a responsibility," Damon said. "The media has been great. I'm being honest with them."

Like calling his teammates "idiots." That's how people know Damon. The shaggy hair and the curious eyes capture people, too, but his interactions - he emanates a nice-guy image, although Vannice was furious with the book's content - captivate.

"He's good at dealing with attention and still going out there and competing," Red Sox catcher Jason Varitek said. "And that's the important part. He gets a ton of it. He's found a way to separate all that and have a phenomenal season."

The Red Sox begin the second half Thursday with a nationally televised game against the Yankees at 6:05 p.m. Carrying a 25-game hitting streak, Damon entered the break hitting .343 with four home runs, 42 RBIs and 65 runs.

Next to Baltimore's Brian Roberts, Damon has been the best leadoff hitter in baseball this season. Fans recognized that - and, perhaps, his cult of personality - and voted him to his first All-Star start, which he made Tuesday night, batting first and playing center field.

In the last season of a four-year, \$31 million contract, Damon will enter the offseason among baseball's top free agents. With agent Scott Boras, he's expected to command \$10 million to \$14 million per season.

"He's having a great, great time," said Mets outfielder Carlos Beltran, Damon's former Royals teammate. "A great life, too."

So it seems. He's got things to do in the bedroom, people to entrance outside of it. He's got fame and he's got fortune and, yes, he's got Joseph and his multi-color dreamcoats.

"Just to do everything like he does - he's awesome at it," Varitek said. "He's a gamer. And there's no bigger compliment from one teammate to another to call him a gamer."