will make out, for example: “Albert Pujols and his agent will end up with enough money to make Chuck Norris cry, thereby curing cancer. #chucknorristears”

Even the stodgy Dr. Freud might have cracked a smile at one of Wilson’s ad-libs during last year’s postseason. Asked what impact Texas’s midseason acquisition of former Cy Young Award winner Cliff Lee had on his development, the 30-year-old left-handed starting pitcher quipped, “Before he came here, I was a righthanded second baseman.”

Whether at his BlackBerry, in the clubhouse or on the mound, Wilson delivers his best stuff the same way: with a headlong intensity. And last season, his sixth in the big leagues, that intensity helped deliver Texas to the first World Series in franchise history.

To the surprise of practically everyone but Wilson, the southpaw made the difficult transition from the bullpen to the starting rotation in 2010. “I begged for the job,” says Wilson, who broke into the big leagues as a starter in 2005 but was moved to the pen during an erratic rookie campaign. “For years I’d been saying I was capable of being really good.”

And he was. Wilson finished last season with a 15–8 record, a 3.35 ERA and 170 strikeouts in 204 innings. He was the second-toughest starter to hit in the American League (.217 batting average against), trailing only Cy Young Award winner Felix Hernandez (.212). Even more remarkably, the onetime lone wolf of the Rangers’ locker room transformed into the de facto leader of the staff. Now, after losing Lee and adding little to the rotation over the winter, Texas needs Wilson to repeat that performance—only under the pressure that comes with being ace of the defending pennant winner.

That’s a lot for anyone to think about. "Talent is irrelevant," says Wilson in a soft, intent voice, echoing something the essayist and fiction editor Gordon Lish once said. "I've got much less natural talent than lots of other pitchers. . . . I wasn’t even the best player on my Little League team." What counts (more Lishspeak) is perseverance, application, industry, assiduity, will, will, desire, desire, desire.

The truth is that Wilson’s career is a hymn
to the work ethic. Former Texas pitching coach Mark Connor remembers pushing him a few winters back to see what he was up to. “Watching a baseball film,” said Wilson.

It turned out he had commissioned a compilation of every bat during the previous season in which a left-handed AL pitcher faced a lefthanded hitter. “I wanted a better feel for an edge,” Conway says. “He’s always on the lookout for new insights and information.”

If real knowledge is knowing the extent of your ignorance, Wilson is about as sagacious as athletes come. This is a player whose training drills range from “stress inoculation” to “visuomotorization” — a nightly ritual that requires him to execute his delivery in the dark in superslow motion. “I strive to maximize my ability within my limitations,” he says, sounding like a self-help book on tape. “Life is all about productivity.”

Wilson said this before spring training, while lounging on a taffy sofa in his tatty Huntington Beach, Calif., condo, his eyes radiating a steady glint. “What’s the John Lennon thing?” he asks. “Yes yourself and there will be peace in the world.” Lots of ballplayers put on an act—“they just aren’t comfortable with themselves, I accept that.”

But what exactly is C.J. Wilson? “Simply put, he’s a polymath and an autodidact,” says Ryan Pirozzolo, the Rangers’ former mental skills coach.

Conner puts it a lot more simply. “C.J. is a perfectionist,” he says. “He has high expectations both on and off the field. For Wilson, there’s always something about his performance that he’s unhappy about.”

He’s also a free-thinking Southern Californian, a martial artist, an actor, a painter, a poet, a maker of omelettes, a groupie for the band P.O.D., and a fan of the movie The Dark Knight. He’s a member of the straight-edge movement, a fervent champion of the straight edge lifestyle, a collector of Ford GT3RS, and has raced against Lewis Hamilton, a recovering alcoholic with a history of substance abuse. “Josh and I formed a bond, in an odd way,” he says. “I was the safe guy, he was the rebel.”

Wilson has learned the value of strength in numbers.”

The qualities in Wilson that most impress Pirozzolo are accountability and selflessness. “He’s got a big heart,” says the coach. He mentions the closed-door meeting that manager Ron Washington had with players last March to reveal he had tested positive for cocaine in 2009. After the skipper apologized, Wilson addressed the stunned gathering. “A team sport is like a family,” he said. “When somebody makes a mistake, you have to back him, too. I’ve done stuff that people haven’t been cool with.”

During the regular season Wilson provided a unique support system for outfielder Josh Hamilton, a recovering alcoholic with a history of substance abuse. “Josh and I formed a bond, in an odd way,” he says. “I was the safe guy for him to hang out with, I knew what he’d been through.” When the Rangers won the pennant on Oct. 22, Wilson and Hamilton toasted each other with ginger ale.

Later that night Wilson turned on his BlackBerry and read a message from one of his teammates: “This boat is real!!!” To which the engineering-minded, race-car-driving lefty who follows the teachings of Lao Tzu replied, “thank you to all the fans that rock it—so proud of my teammates!!!”

Wilson was never more atwitter.