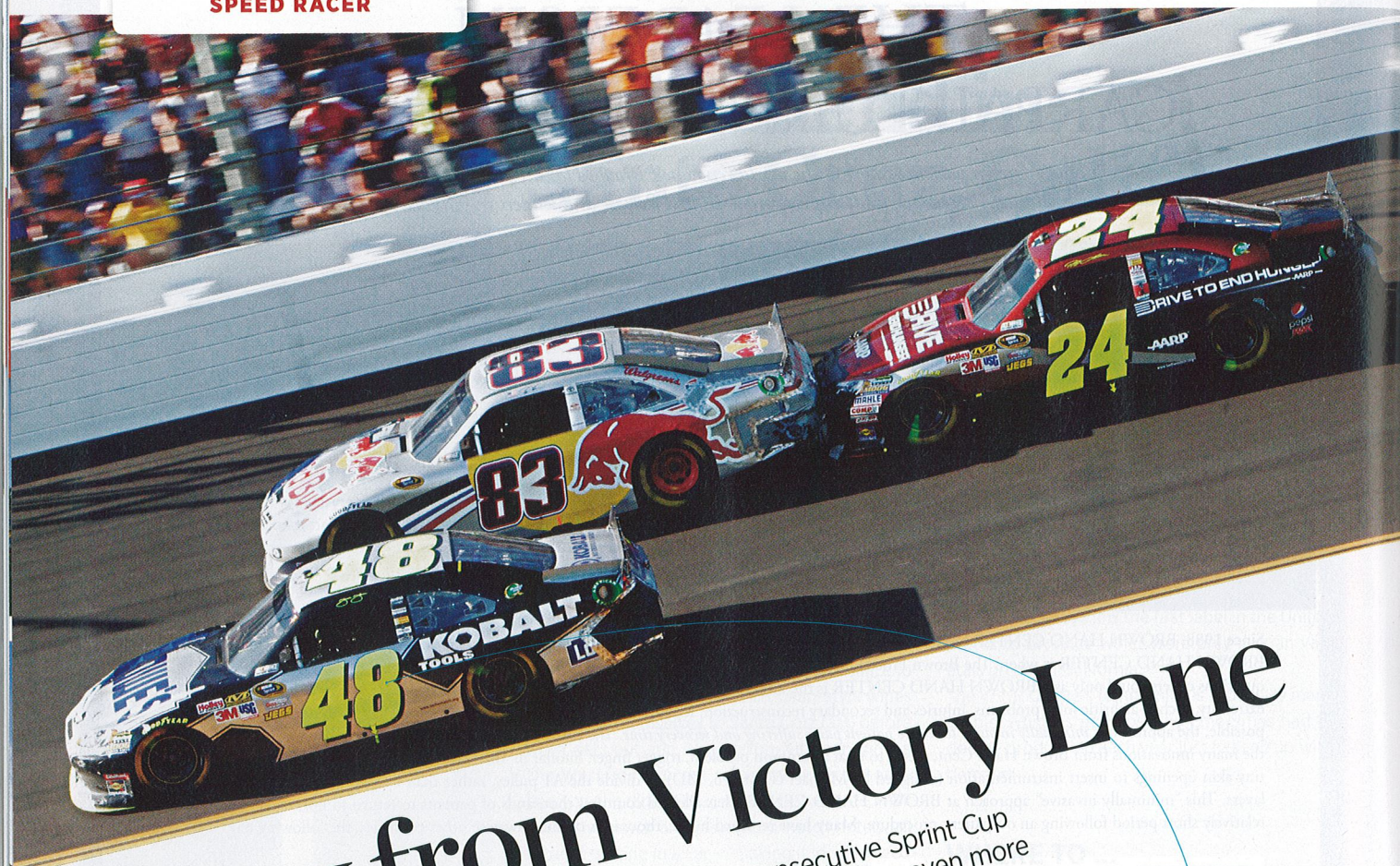


SPEED RACER



# View from Victory Lane

NASCAR superstar **JIMMIE JOHNSON** already has five consecutive Sprint Cup Series victories under his racing suit. But No. 48 has his sights set on even more — both on and off the track.

**T**HE TERM **TRADING PAINT** IS FAIRLY COMMON IN NASCAR CIRCLES. It refers to one driver's nudging another with his car, thereby sharing pigments. In recent years, most of the paint that has been taken off Jimmie Johnson's No. 48 car has been taken from his rear bumper, because he's usually out in front.

Johnson has won the sport's Sprint Cup Series an unprecedented five straight times, and he's gunning for a sixth win in November. But the 35-year-old native of El Cajon, Calif., who lives with his wife, Chandra, and young daughter Genevieve in Charlotte, N.C., is about more than just left turns around an oval track. When he's not racing, he's deeply involved in the Jimmie Johnson Foundation — which raises money for several charities — and with various off-the-track business ventures, including a new video game, *Jimmie Johnson's Anything with an Engine*. *Forbes* recently named him the most influential athlete in all of sports. Johnson zooms by at blurring speeds, but he slammed on the brakes long enough to have a chat with *American Way* about NASCAR, family and regular pit stops at the White House. >>



@ For more information about the Jimmie Johnson Foundation and the many causes it supports, go to [www.jimmiejohnsonfoundation.org](http://www.jimmiejohnsonfoundation.org)

**AMERICAN WAY:** If you'll forgive the pun, what drove you into racing?

**JIMMIE JOHNSON:** For me, I just grew up around racing as a kid. My grandparents owned a motorcycle shop in Southern California. I grew up around motorcycles and started riding as a hobby. I realized it was fun to race and fun to compete. So it all started there.

**AW:** What sets a great driver apart?

**JJ:** At this level, it all boils down to communication. Every driver at this level has been a champion before and has had great success throughout his career. At this point, it's a matter of how well you feel in the race car and describing that to your team. I find that to be the most challenging thing.

**AW:** There is a certain amount of danger involved in what you do. Does that enter your mind, or are you so used to racing every weekend that you've learned to ignore it?

**JJ:** It's a little of both. I felt like it was much more dangerous racing motocross as a kid. We're in pretty safe vehicles, and our sport has worked very hard to make it as safe as it is. There are head-neck devices that we use and special seats inside the cars. I feel like we're much safer today than we've ever been. But I'd be lying if I said it didn't enter my mind. There was a rash of five drivers killed in a 12-month period, with Dale Earnhardt being the final one (at the 2001 Daytona 500). I was concerned. We knew as a sport it was something that we had to get to the bottom of. We understand the dynamics of a wreck more now, and we've been able to dramatically decrease the chances of fatalities.

**AW:** Is there any camaraderie with the other drivers, or is it all competition 24/7?

**JJ:** There are different guys I've developed friendships with over the years. We've even had run-ins, but you have to be a man and talk it out. There are guys I get along with better than others. Competition is a weird thing.

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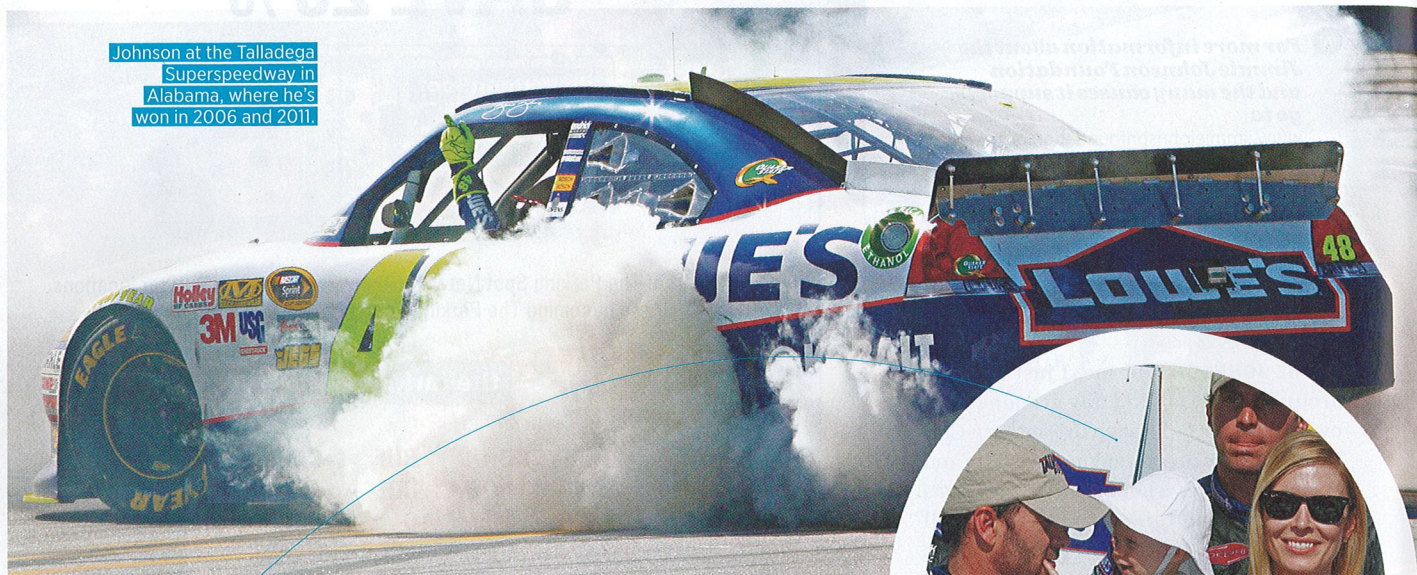


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Johnson at the Talladega Superspeedway in Alabama, where he's won in 2006 and 2011.

**AW:** You and your wife, Chandra, welcomed your first child, Genevieve Marie, into the world last July. How has that changed your life?

**JJ:** Having Genevieve has been the most amazing experience. Friends and family said that you just have to experience it to understand. Now I do. Having her has made me a better person and a better man. I'm a lot more patient. I experience emotions that I never thought I'd have.

**AW:** What if someday Genevieve wants to become the next Danica Patrick? Will you be wary about it or enthusiastic?

**JJ:** Enthusiastic! I love my sport. I would like to be a help to her. If she chose motorsports as a career path, at least I would know what to do. If she wanted to be a ballerina, that would be a problem. I don't know how to do that.

**AW:** You and Chandra started the Jimmie Johnson Foundation in 2006 and as a result have helped a lot of charities and people in need. Has it exceeded your expectations?

**JJ:** It has. We recognize how much more still needs to be done in just the three areas we're supporting — the area around San Diego where I grew up; around Muskogee, Okla., where my wife grew up; and where we live in Charlotte. We're doing what we can, and we're really thankful for all the folks in racing and all the fans who have helped and contributed. It has been amazing.

**AW:** Your schedule is incredibly tight, and free time must be precious. So what do you like to do

with it when you do have some?

**JJ:** Right now it's really been just spending time with the family. Genevieve is just at a great age. We go for bike rides, or I take her along with me in the jogger when I go for runs. I love spending time with her. We go to music class when we're home. It's fun to watch her at such a young age experience sounds of guitars and tambourines.

**AW:** What do you do when you need to relax?

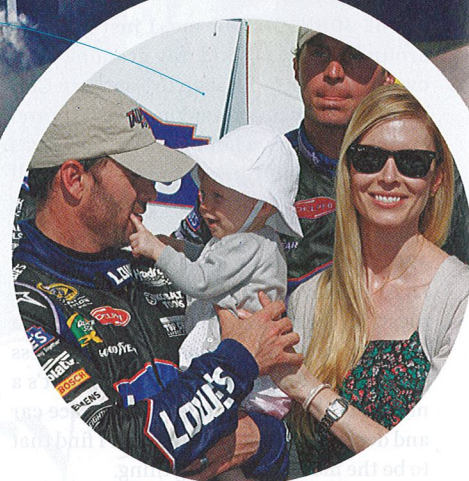
**JJ:** I love to vacation at the beach and re-create those Corona commercials, if possible. That's my speed and pace, and a good artist to listen to while doing that is Jack Johnson. If I'm looking to relax, that's the scene I try to create.

**AW:** You're the only driver in NASCAR history to win five consecutive Sprint Cup championships. How do you fight complacency and keep the competitive fire burning?

**JJ:** So far, it's been easy. At some point, I'm sure it becomes more difficult. But this is who I am, and this is what I do. For my teammates, it's the same for them. They're what make the difference, and I'm so appreciative to have them. Most people don't realize what a team sport NASCAR is. At Hendrick Motorsports, we have 550 people working together on a team. None of them will ever allow any of us to become complacent.

**AW:** We hear a lot about the training regimen of other athletes but rarely about race-car drivers. Is it important for you to work out and eat right?

**JJ:** Absolutely. It's a very physical sport. The



repetition of it, as well: We're in cars three days a week, 38 out of 41 weeks of the year, often during the hottest months of the year. We can be out there for as long as five and a half hours. So physical fitness is a big part of my week. I have a weightlifting program that I do four days a week, and I run. I just finished a six-mile run, actually. I really enjoy cycling, but it takes a long time to get a good ride in. Running with Genevieve is my main form of cardio. In a short week, I do 15 miles; in a long week, 25.

**AW:** When you're driving on the freeway, is it hard to resist the temptation to go really fast?

**JJ:** I think I get it out on the racetrack. I'm not a speed demon on the road. I don't want a ticket, either.

**AW:** Are there any veteran drivers whom you have sought out for advice?

**JJ:** Especially while climbing the ladder, I would talk to anyone whose ear I could get and ask a question. I'd say Jeff Gordon in my Cup career has been the most helpful. As time has gone on, I've looked for other athletes, entertainers, other successful people. I have relationships with coaches [and] with businessmen who have experienced

the world and have an interesting perspective to share.

**AW:** Why No. 48?

**JJ:** With NASCAR, when you start a new team, they provide you with a list of numbers that are available. In my career the numbers 4 and 8 have always been good for me. Of the available numbers, 48 was there. Also, we were brought up inside the No. 24 shop [which is teammate Gordon's number], and our team was a spinoff of 24. So things just took that path.

**AW:** What is your relationship like with your two younger brothers, Jarit and Jessie? Are they involved in racing at all?

**JJ:** It's good. It's so tough being on the road all the time; I'd love to spend more time with the family and my brothers. They're involved in more hobby racing than anything. Jarit has two children and runs a fabrication shop, so he doesn't have time to do it as much anymore. Jessie does racing on weekends in California when he can.

**AW:** You've been honored at the White House more than once. What's that been like?

**JJ:** That's as good as it gets. I was fortunate to be there a few times as a result of the five championships. I got to meet George W. Bush, then I was able to go back and meet President Obama, which was interesting, as well. That's the highest honor, to go to the White House.

**AW:** If you weren't racing for a living, what do you think you'd be doing?

**JJ:** I'd be in trouble.

**MICHAEL VENTRE** is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles whose work appears regularly on MSNBC.com and in *American Way*, *Variety* and other publications. He never exceeds the speed limit.



FROM LEFT: HHP PHOTO/ALAN MARLER; HHP/REGG ELLMAN; HHP/REGG ELLMAN

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