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Johnson takes a victory lap locally, bearing gifts

By Bill Center

Cindee Noble knew Jimmie Johnson long before he became the only driver in NASCAR history to win four straight championships.

More than two decades ago, Noble was Johnson's fifth- and sixth-grade teacher at Crest Elementary on the eastern outskirts of El Cajon.

She remembers Johnson, noting that it would be hard to forget him.

"You don't very often see someone who had the passion he had as a child," Noble said yesterday after being reunited with her former student during Johnson's visit to his childhood neighborhood and school.

"Sometimes he came to school in his racing uniform with his name on the back. To see that depth of passion, it's rare."

Back then Johnson did his racing on mini-motorcycles at Barona Oaks Raceway when not riding up-and-down the slopes of the foothill enclave east of El Cajon.

What does he remember of Crest Elementary?

"Skateboarding and making soap," Johnson recalled. As for studies ...

"I was a B student," he said, adding he had to be or his parents wouldn't let him race on weekends.

Yesterday morning, Johnson, a native of El Cajon, began a whirlwind one-day visit to San Diego County by visiting Crest Elementary and meeting with the 125 children attending his elementary school.



Howard Lipin/San Diego Union-Tribune

NASCAR champ Jimmie Johnson gets high-fives and shakes hands with students at Crest Elementary School, where he once was a student. Johnson, on the heels of his historic fourth-consecutive NASCAR Sprint Cup championship, visited the school to announce the San Diego County recipients of education grants from the Jimmie Johnson Foundation and Lowe's Toolbox for Education. Around the country, a total of \$922,000 was awarded.

Later, he met with Marines and their families at Camp Pendleton. And he capped the day by appearing at a homecoming rally at the Lowe's Store in Santee.

It is not unusual for Johnson to visit his hometown. Although he lives near his team's racing headquarters in Charlotte, N.C., Johnson has visited San Diego County at least twice a year since he won his first NASCAR championship in 2006.

And when he returns, he comes bearing gifts.

Yesterday morning at Crest Elementary, Johnson handed out grants totaling \$491,781 to 11 San Diego County schools, bringing to more than \$1.5 million, plus gifts-in-kind, the money Johnson has donated through his Jimmie Johnson Foundation to area causes.

Just down the hill from Crest Elementary are four Habitat for Humanity homes that Johnson also funded through his foundation and the annual golf tournament and charity auction he hosts.

"I can't tell you how much this means to my wife (Chandra) and I," Johnson said of his projects, which began shortly after Crest was devastated by the Cedar Fire in 2003. Teaming with his sponsor, Lowe's, Johnson raised more than \$250,000 in a week to benefit fire victims.

Lowe's Toolbox for Education teamed with Johnson this year to award \$922,000 in grants to 15 schools in San Diego County, Oklahoma (Chandra's home) and North Carolina.

What's next?

"I don't know," said Johnson. "But we'll be doing something. It means a lot to me. It's more fun handing the money out than raising it.

"And to see these children today. Twenty-five years ago, it was me sitting down there (pointing to the assembled students). It's amazing to come back, to drive past the house I grew up in ... amazing how small it seems now.

"I'll be back."

Which could also be the case in his racing career.

Johnson's run of four straight NASCAR championships could just be the start of a longer run. Johnson is only 34, an age when most NASCAR champions of the past have just been peaking.

"To be honest, I want to be remembered among the greatest drivers ever," said Johnson, whose four straight championships have made him the fourth driver to win as many as four titles in a career.

Johnson is the only driver to have raced in all six of NASCAR's Chase for the Championship playoffs. Johnson's 47 victories already rank him 13th on NASCAR's all-time list of race winners, and his 16.2 victory percentage is sixth-highest in racing.

In 60 Chase starts, Johnson has a record 18 wins, which is 30 percent.