

THE CHASE: AN ULTIMATE SHOWDOWN

Illustrated

NOVEMBER 2007

**SECRET
WEAPON**

Virginia
International
Raceway

**NASCAR
GRIEVES**

Finding Strength
From Sadness

ANATOMY OF...
A Lug Nut

Jimmie JOHNSON

**GOLFING HIS WAY
TO A TITLE**

Jimmie Johnson

**Golfing His
Way To A Title**

by Michael J. Fresina

"I'm not a golfer," insists defending Nextel Cup champion Jimmie Johnson. "I play golf. There is a difference."

According to the PGA of America, more than 27 million adults in the U.S. played at least one, 18-hole round over the last 12 months. But very few scored well enough to be considered "golfers."

No matter how well he scores, Johnson, who has only played sporadically since his youth, is now hooked on the game as a way to relax. >

Johnson is at the front of an ever-expanding throng of NASCAR drivers who golf to clear their minds. This year, two wheelmen even made *Golf Digest's* annual list of the 220 best athlete-golfers: Dale Jarrett and Michael Waltrip.

Jarrett, a scratch golfer, landed at No. 11 on the list with Waltrip, an 18 handicapper, sitting at 215.

According to Jim Hunter, NASCAR's vice president of communications, "Golf is a perfect getaway for today's drivers. It takes so much focus that you can't be any good at it if you're thinking about anything else."

And because drivers are so competitive, Hunter says, "They don't want to devote time to anything they can't be good at, so they work at it. They really want to conquer the game. Most drivers are amazed at how difficult golf is. It looks easy, but hitting that little white ball is tough."

"A lot of these guys like to really let it rip, taking out their frustrations on the ball," Hunter says. "And in golf, you can hit a bad shot and cuss and there's no one there to fine you. I think they like that."

Johnson rediscovered the game during last year's Chase. His wife, Chandra, thought he needed a release from the rigors and pressure of running for a title and suggested he hit the links.

"I knew that he needed to do something to get his mind off of racing," Chandra says. "His friends would invite him to golf and he wouldn't go. Last year's Chase was really hard because he was under a lot of pressure. I told him, 'Get out there and have some fun, enjoy your friends, enjoy being outdoors.'"

At first, Johnson didn't listen. Then, after failing to finish among the top five in the first four Chase races, Chandra forced his hand. She bought him golf lessons.

"He took the lessons and really got into it," she says. "He started playing every week. I think that completely mellowed him out and really helped him stop obsessing over what was going on. And, he definitely caught the golf bug."

"I love it. It's something he can do for the rest of his life," she says.

Johnson, in a move that will confound many male golfers, not only began playing regularly, he encouraged his wife to join him.

So during the 2006 Chase, instead of stressing-out, the Johnsons played golf.

"Swinging my heart out and knocking the snot out of that little white ball," he says, "did a lot to keep me settled and focused last year during the Chase."



For the first time since he was just a kid messing around on local municipal courses in Southern California, Johnson enjoyed golf.

Now — one title later and in the midst of another Chase run — the Johnsons, along with Hendrick Motorsports crew chief Chad Knaus, golf together as often as time permits.

"On the road," Johnson says, "we sometimes play on Saturdays after practice. Chandra is stuck in our motorhome beginning every Thursday we're on the road together. By Saturday, she gets a little cabin crazy and needs to get out."

"She is just starting to enjoy the game and is good for about nine holes, but not ready for 18."

Chandra admits that she's just learning the game and occasionally takes breaks on the course, but she always keeps an accurate scorecard of Jimmie's round.

"I enjoy anything we make time to do together," she says. "We ski and snowboard together, but golf is the latest thing."

Though golfing on the road can be a cherished escape from life at the track, Johnson says, "Mondays have become the preferred day for us to get out and just have fun together. The courses are usually not crowded, and it's a great way to put the previous weekend behind us and take a break before we get ready for the next race."

Johnson, whose best score for a full round is 96, wants to be a better golfer.

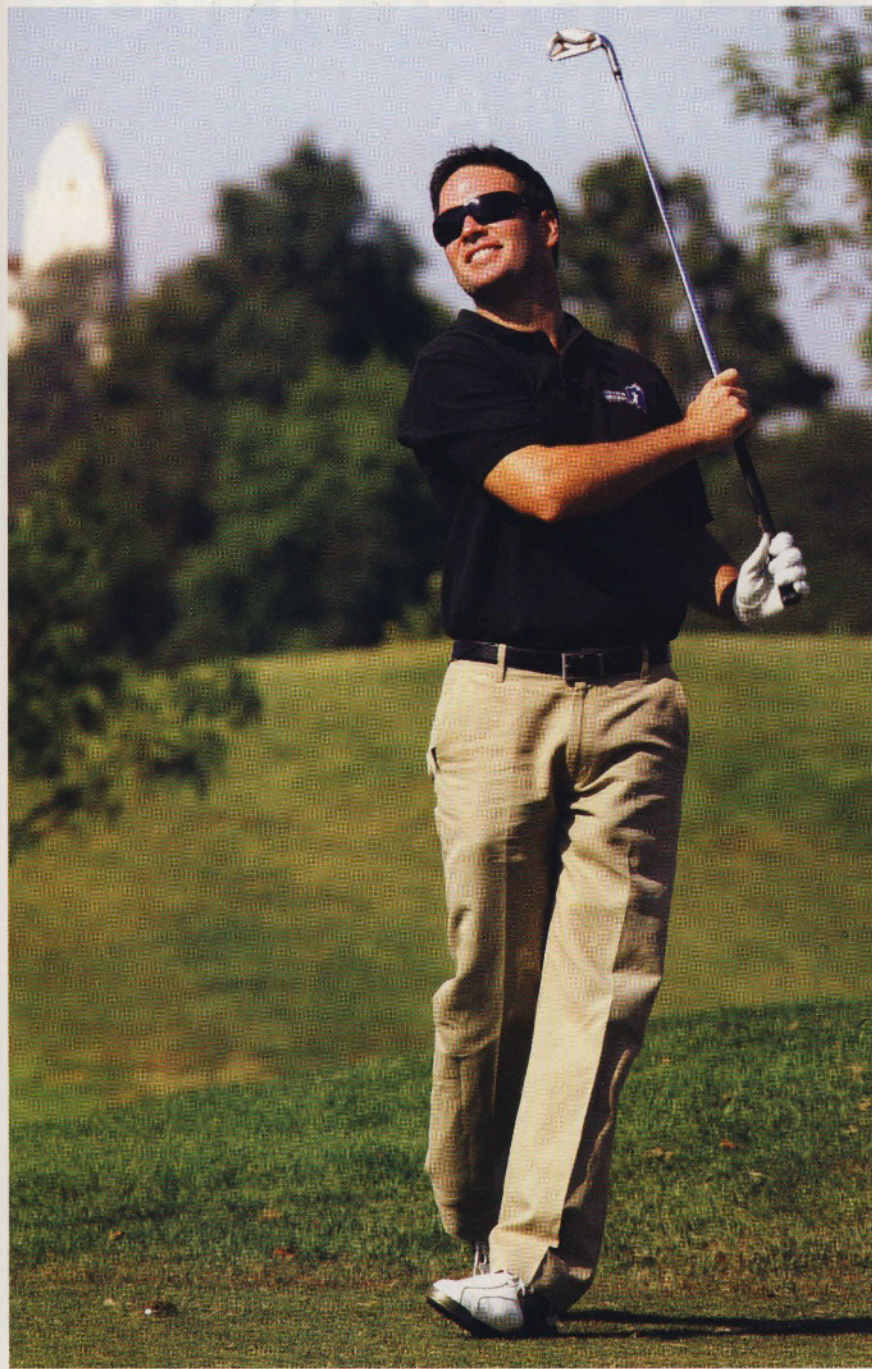
"I've played enough now, and actually have a decent swing, that I want to start scoring better," he says. "I have some shots I can count on and can use all my clubs. At first, I had no expectations. Now, I get frustrated because it seems impossible to shave strokes off with any consistency."



Jimmie's ultimate goal, Chandra says, is "to go out with his friends, who are really good at golf, and be able to keep up. But golf is not something you can just pick up and be good at."

"When he's out there, he focuses on the details of the game and loves to putt. He's really good out of the sand, but that might be because he gets a lot of practice!"

Always supportive of his driver, Knaus thinks Johnson is pretty good.



"Compared to me, he's good," Knaus says. "But if you compare him to Tiger Woods, maybe not so good."

Kyle Petty, a single-digit-handicap golfer, has seen Johnson play, and he is impressed by how well Johnson's learned the game.

"I watched him at a course in Michigan a while back, and he had some good tee shots and some really good approach shots. I haven't seen him throw any clubs in the

water, but who am I to say anything about anger? I punch cabinets, so I can't say anything about people throwing clubs."

Because of his celebrity, Johnson has had the pleasure of playing some great courses and in a few big events. When he's in New York City, where he and Chandra keep a second home, he heads out onto Long Island to play at the East Hampton Golf Club.

"It has a super-modern clubhouse with

a links course layout on one side for the first nine holes and a heavily-wooded, more traditional layout on the other side for the back nine," Johnson says. "It's a really challenging course for someone like me who hasn't played a ton."

Last spring, Johnson was invited to play at Charlotte's Quail Hollow Country Club in the Wachovia Championship Pro-Am with PGA Tour professional Darren Clarke.

"Playing with him was a total blast, and to see the pristine condition the course was in for the pros was insane," Johnson says. "But playing in that event was one of the most difficult things I've ever done."

"When you get nervous in a race car, you can grip the wheel tighter and settle down. If you get nervous in golf and start gripping your clubs tighter, all those little muscles that you need for a good swing conspire to ruin your game. It'll kill you every time."

His nervousness was not lost on Chandra.

"Watching from the gallery," she says, "I could actually see his legs shaking. It's nerve-racking to play in front of a huge crowd of people if you're not a great golfer and are expected to at least be decent."

Johnson, Clarke and fellow Hendrick driver Casey Mears scored a 66 for the round, eight shots back of the leaders.

As is the case with many fellow drivers who have adopted the game, Johnson has discovered that his career as a racer did little to help him excel at golf.

"The hand-eye coordination used to drive a race car is completely different than what's required for golf," he says. "Controlling momentum, feeling speed and knowing what a car is doing underneath me is easy. Hitting that little white ball — even though it is sitting still — is a completely different deal."

Even as he tries to improve, Johnson says what he likes best about playing golf is getting out and away from racing for a few hours — though he admits occasionally taking calls, e-mailing and texting between shots.

"I'm a driver," he says, "I can never get away from racing 100 percent." **N**



Doing Good

*The Jimmie Johnson Foundation
Makes an Impact*

Sure, Jimmie and Chandra Johnson love to golf, ski and win races, but the couple also shares a strong passion for helping others.

When the Johnsons established the Jimmie Johnson Foundation in February of 2006, they did so with the goal of assisting children, families and communities in need

Eagle was inducted into the school's Athletic Hall of Fame. The visit included **JOHNSON KICKING UP SOME DUST** on the athletic fields in his No. 48 ride and a speech in which Johnson suggested the students take the rest of the day off.

"Unfortunately," Johnson says, "I didn't have enough pull to make that happen for them."

Boris Said and Bobby Labonte as well as team owner Rick Hendrick and singer/actor Nick Lachey — also included a performance and donation from **GAVIN DEGRAW**.

For the Johnsons and the foundation, the biggest event of the week, however, was

more than 200 players — including drivers, celebrities, San Diego dignitaries and sponsors.

"My dream," Johnson says, "is to have the event be so much fun that people want to come back and anyone who wasn't there, hears about it and wants to come next year."

All told, the JJJ raised more than \$500,000 and was able to begin construction — with **JIMMIE AND CHANDRA BOTH SIGNING A STUD WALL** — on a new home for a deserving



throughout the U.S., but narrowed their initial focus.

"At first, Chandra and I want to do things to benefit communities that mean a lot to us, the places we were raised. Southern California for me, Oklahoma for Chandra and Charlotte, where we currently live."

In August, during the week leading up to the race at Fontana — which Johnson dominated, incidentally — the foundation made its first big splash. On Tuesday, it made a \$15,000 donation to Johnson's alma mater, Granite Hills High School in El Cajon, Calif., where the former GHHS



Later that evening, the Johnsons hosted a gala dinner and auction that raised more than \$200,000. The fundraiser — which drew fellow drivers **JUAN PABLO MONTOYA**, Brian Vickers, Kyle Petty,

the foundation's inaugural charity golf tournament to benefit Habitat for Humanity of San Diego.

Putting on a golf tournament was a no-brainer for Johnson.

"It's a perfect fit," he says. "The weather in San Diego is great and now that I love golf, it's a natural combination of things that mean a lot to me."

Held at Riverwalk Golf Club, the tournament featured

family in El Cajon on Thursday morning.

Because the week's success exceeded all expectations, Johnson hopes to build two homes with the money raised.

"We'll have to wait and see, but it looks like we will be able to do much more for the community than we originally thought," Johnson says. "It was an incredible week."