

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON ADDRESS BY JIMMIE JOHNSON, NASCAR SPRINT
CUP
CHAMPION

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MS. SMITH: Good afternoon. My name is Sylvia Smith. I'm the
Washington editor of the Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette and president of
the National Press Club. We're the world's leading professional
organization for journalists. And on behalf of our 3,700 members
worldwide, I would like to welcome our speaker and our guests today to
our event. (Applause.) I'd also like to welcome those of you who are
watching on C-SPAN or listening on American Public Media and XM
Satellite Radio.

The National Press Club is committed to the future of journalism
through informative programming, journalism education, and fostering a
free press worldwide. For more information about the Press Club or to
blog about today's event, please visit our website at www.press.org.

We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterward I'll ask
as many questions from the audience as time permits. So please hold

your applause during the speech so that we have as much time as
possible for questions. I'd also like to explain that if you do hear
applause, it may be from the guests and members of the general public
who attend our event, not necessarily from the working press.

I'd now like to introduce our head table guests and ask them to

stand briefly when their names are called. From your right, Nadia Bilbassy-Charters, senior correspondent of Middle East Broadcast Center; Ted Cressey (sp) of the DCI Group; Michelle Katz, a freelance writer; Ann (sp) Hunter, wife of Jim Hunter; Bill McCloskey, editor -- I'm sorry -- at-large director of the Society for Professional Journalists; Chandra Johnson, wife of our speaker; Melissa Charbonneau of CBN News and vice chair of the speakers committee.

Skipping over our speaker for just a minute, Shawn Bullard, president of Duetto Group and a member of the speakers committee, who organized today's event. Thanks, Shawn. Jim Hunter, vice president of corporate communications for NASCAR; Kelly Wright, anchor-reporter for Fox News; Lisa Zagaroli of McClatchy Newspapers and the Charlotte Observer. Welcome. (Applause.)

Today's speaker has been on earth a shade over three decades, but he often says he began his racing career 27 years ago. If I'm doing my math correctly, he hadn't even entered first grade yet.

Legend has it that Gary Johnson, a diehard racing fanatic, decided his son needed a motorcycle. So one day he brought home a motorcycle for young Jimmie, hoping, like all fathers, his son might enjoy a sport he himself dabbled in. Little did he know that Jimmie would enjoy racing so much that, before too long, winning would become second nature.

The naturally talented NASCAR driver, who often says he's been racing his whole life, once told a sports reporter in Richmond that he wouldn't know what he'd do if he weren't racing. Here's his quote: "When you're in traffic, you can't see what's going on. The car's buffeting a lot and you're doing 180 miles an hour. It can be intimidating." Is that an understatement? "But it's a cool experience. You find yourself zoning out."

Jimmie Johnson has certainly found his zone. He's the only driver to win at least three races in his first six seasons. He's had 33 career victories. He's won at least a quarter of the NASCAR chase races since its inception in 2004. And if that isn't enough, as his NASCAR career began to take off, People Magazine named him one of the sexiest men alive. (Scattered laughter.)

Washington Nationals fans might not acknowledge it, but car racing has become America's number two spectator sport, second only to professional football. Once a Tobacco Belt phenomenon, NASCAR now supports a national audience of 75 million fans and another 75 million elsewhere in the world. That kind of fan base creates superstars of the best drivers. Some of them use their platform to help favored charities or start their own foundations.

A couple of years ago, Johnson and his wife established the Jimmie Johnson Foundation. It has partnered with Habitat for Humanity, Make a Wish, the Red Cross, NASCAR's foundation annual blood and marrow drive, as well as many other local, regional and national organizations. Today we hope to learn about where he hopes to take this fairly new philanthropic initiative.

But I'm sure our audience also wants to know how many wins he

hopes to capture in the remainder of the season. And personally, I'd like to know, what does it really feel like when something goes wrong in front of you or behind you while traveling at 180 miles an hour?

Ladies and gentlemen, please help me welcome to the National Press Club podium the reigning NASCAR Sprint Cup Series champion, Jimmie Johnson. (Applause.)

MR. JOHNSON: Well, thank you, everybody. This is quite an honor to be here today. And to be honest with you, I think I should be excited to be up here, so I've been told, but I find public speaking as one of the most frightening things I've ever done in my life. So I'm glad it's a small audience. And it is ironic, coming from a guy that's hit the wall at 200 miles an hour and wears a four-layer fire suit to work every day. This is different with a tie on.

But it's great to be here. It really is. NASCAR tried even selling it to me and told me that there were a lot of other great athletes that have been up here to speak, and even the dalai lama, right? Is that correct? That didn't help me a bit. (Laughter.) Still scared. I would rather hit the wall and do those things that you don't quite understand than be up here speaking.

But I'm going to enjoy it, and really going to enjoy telling my story. I'm sure that a lot of people in the room aren't aware of NASCAR or of my story, so I'll briefly run through that. And I understand we have a bunch of questions, so I won't spend too much time elaborating on points.

But I grew up in El Cajon, California. My dad was a huge racing fan. My mom supported it as well. And my parents are really a big part of my career getting started, and also the local racing community in southern California. My grandparents owned a motorcycle shop. And out of that shop, my dad sponsored the local kids to go to local tracks and donated his time. He was a heavy equipment operator, and my mom was a school bus driver, on a side note there. But my dad would go out and build these tracks and my mom would run the snack bar. And instead of being at a baseball camp or soccer for the day, whatever it may be, the race track is where I grew up. That's just what my family did.

I have two younger brothers. They all grew up racing as well. They both grew up racing as well and truly enjoyed it. They both still kind of pursue motor sports now, but my career certainly has taken me much further. You know, my first real big opportunity came along at 15 years old. But before that, I grew up racing dirt bikes; started at five.

I have this one story -- I'm kind of jumping ahead in my head here, but it's one story of me winning my first championship. It's kind of interesting and maybe paints a better picture about what really goes on inside of my head. I was eight years old, fell down during the race and broke my knee and had reconstructive knee surgery at eight years old. And I was in the middle of my first championship, and I couldn't believe I was going to lose this championship. It was everything I'd worked for.

So somehow I convinced my parents to let me ride. And my dad designed a way for this bracket to be welded on on the frame of the motorcycle, borrowed somebody's larger gear, and propped my leg up on this bracket and rode one lap of the remaining two events, which then tied me in points with this other kid I was racing against. And the tiebreaker came down to who won the most races that year, and I won the championship. So I've just wanted to race my entire life. And I am fortunate it worked out, because I'd don't know what I'd be doing if it didn't work out.

But, you know, like I was going to say, my first big opportunity really came along when I was 15 years old. I had a chance to race in what was called the Mickey Thompson Stadium Off-Road Series. And there were these great trucks and buggies that ran on the stadium floors around the country. And my dad's persistence really helped me get my first chance. And when that first chance came along, they took me to the Pasadena Rose Bowl to race for my first event; just then 15 years old, never been in front of that many people before or raced anything with four wheels.

And the way the inversion worked out through the heat races and qualifying, they started me on the front row for the future event. And I ran for my life that night. I didn't know what was going to happen. I was scared to death and ran for my life and led almost every lap until the last corner of the final lap. A guy got by me and I finished second. And that really catapulted my racing career and my professional career in motor sports.

Later that year I finished up the remaining events and ran the second season with this team. And while competing for the championship in the super-light division, a great family friend of mine by the name of Rick Johnson, who was a seven-time Motocross champion and kind of moving from Motocross himself into off-road truck racing and had a great relationship with Chevrolet, he was doing some work behind the scenes to help me with Chevy.

And this one race that I was at, the head of the Chevrolet racing department was there watching. I ran really well, won the race that evening, and took a photo with him. And when I took a photo with him, I remember the photo and I had no idea of the significance of that

photo until later in the year. They were going to bring out a second truck. And Herb Fishel from Chevrolet took that photo into the meeting room and threw it down on the conference room table and said, "This is the guy I want to develop and drive this race truck." And at that point they signed me up; I was 16 years old and had a factory Chevrolet contract.

And, at that point, my career -- I really felt, was on the fast-track and anything was going to happen.

But, the motorsports is a weird sport. It's tough. The business of it is tough to make work all the time. And the series I was racing in for Chevrolet was having its troubles finding sponsorship and actually ended up folding. But before it folded, I had met some guys that raced in the Midwest-based series. And Chevrolet again came to

me with another opportunity and said, look, if you want to meet these folks in these other racing series, and also do some television for us, we can arrange that.

And I was still pretty young. I was probably 18 or 19 years old -- no clue about television, and what to do there. And I accepted the job and became a pit road commentator for ESPN, this Midwest-based off-road racing series, while I was still racing on the West Coast.

And through that I met some guys out of St. Joseph, Missouri -- Stan and Randy Herzog that were huge race fans and loved motorsports themselves. And once I got hooked up with them -- I had to do a lot of selling, by the way. They were a Dodge team, and I was trying to bring Chevrolet in, and I, you know, built my own Press kits; I built my own proposals; and went in and sold to Chevy that they needed the Herzogs, and vice versa, and put these meetings together.

And I had no clue what I was doing except for the fact that I loved motorsports and I knew it would be my shot. And, fortunately, those things came together and I got the Herzogs and Chevrolet put together. I raced with them for -- let's see, for six years. I started in their off-road trucks for two years, and ran in the ASA series -- which is a national touring series, but it's probably two or three steps below what you'd see in the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series.

And then I got my chance to race in the Busch Series, and then got involved with Hendrick Motorsports, the cup series. And my opportunity with Hendrick really was something I didn't expect to have happened. I was racing in the Busch Series in my first season, and my team wasn't going to have financial backing to come back in 2000 -- I think it was 2001 at the time, it was in the 2000 season.

And I went to Jeff Gordon for some advice. He was somebody that I felt had a similar path -- not your typical NASCAR-type driver. I had some opportunities being thrown at me, but it involved leaving Chevrolet and the team I was driving with. And the loyalty side of me, I just couldn't do. I couldn't walk away.

So I needed advice and I went to Jeff. And after this conversation I had with Jeff, I was surprised that, one, he would spend some time to meet with me. And we talked for a little bit, and at the end of that conversation he let me know that Hendrick was going to start a fourth cup team, and that I was the only driver that they had been looking at at the time.

And, to me, I could not believe it or understand it, with all the great talent in the Winston Cup Series at the time. And, literally, three weeks later I had a signed contract to drive for Hendrick Motorsports in 2002 -- to start my full-time season with them, and this was August of 2000. So, I really struggled with understanding it, but I didn't care; signed on the dotted line; and -- (laughter) -- it's all been great since.

I've had a great career through motorsports. I've won 33, 34 victories, two championships. It's been quite a ride. And there's a lot of other details in there that I've kind of left out and, hopefully, will be in the questions. I don't want to bore you guys

too long with my whole life story.

But, a few other key points through my life: I met my wonderful wife in 2002 and we got married in 2004. And through her support, in making sure that I'm keeping my butt in line, and doing the right things, and being the right guy, has really, really helped my career. And we have -- we have a fantastic relationship.

I give her a lot of credit for the Jimmie Johnson Foundation and where it is today. She really carries the torch and makes a lot of stuff happen inside the Foundation. Plus, give me a square kick in the butt to get things moving, because I was dragging my feet with so many great charities that we support.

But I couldn't get my head around starting a foundation, and employing people, and more staff, and everything that would go with it. And she took the ball and said, look, we've got to do this, we've got to run with it, and really got the thing off the ground.

And right now our vision for the Foundation is to really give back to the places where we grew up and to where we live in Charlotte. We have a golf tournament that's taking place in California, this is our second annual golf tournament coming up in August. It's been hugely successful.

We've partnered with Habitat for Humanity. Growing up on Southern California, I spent a lot of time worried about firefighters -- I'm sorry, worrying about fires that were coming through, and all the fires that had to be fought. And our home had been burnt down a few times, and just really a scary thing.

So, when we went back and partnered with Habitat, it just made sense to kind of give back to the housing community and the community there through Habitat. We're hopeful to do something in Oklahoma where my wife is from -- she grew up in Muskogee, Oklahoma; and, again, supporting what's going on Charlotte.

So, it's been a great career. I feel like we're just scratching the surface in a lot of ways. I feel I've got a lot of great years of driving left behind me; and also, working through our foundation, a lot that we can do to do our part to give back to our racing community and to our country. So, we're certainly enjoying all those aspects of it and working away, as we do week in and week out.

It's a long schedule. It's 30 -- we've got 38 races, 36 for points, and then two additional events that come along. A lot of testing; a lot of public appearances, working for your sponsors; and a lot of different things that go on. But, through it all, I feel I'm the luckiest guy walking the planet. I just wake up every single day and do something that I love to do.

And, again, I'm very fortunate, at a young age there wasn't anything else -- (inaudible) --. It's what I wanted to do. So, I feel very fortunate and, to be quite honest with you, through it all I feel like I'm living the American dream. I've had an opportunity. I've made the most of it. And certainly proud to be where I am today.

At this time, I guess we'll go to questions. And, once again, thank you to everybody for showing up today.

(Applause.)

MS. SMITH: (Off mike.) Lot of questions.

We have a lot of questions. And actually there were quite a few on this theme -- somebody e-mailed this one in to me. It says, how is the economy affecting NASCAR teams? Last week Chip Jinskanasi (mispronunciation) --

MR. JOHNSON: Ganassi.

MS. SMITH: Ganassi -- shut down Dario Franchitti's unsponsored race team. When the season opened in Daytona in February, 53 cars attempted to make the race. Last weekend, only 45 cars showed up, six of which lacked full sponsorship and are operating on shoe-string budgets. AP reported there were many more empty seats in the grandstands for Saturday night's event.

So, how's the economy affecting things?

MR. JOHNSON: Well, it certainly is affecting things. Gas prices where they are, I feel that fans don't have the discretionary money they did to come and view, really, any sport -- NASCAR, for that matter. Our fans are extremely loyal and, through the tough market, it -- you know, we are seeing some effects but, to be quite honest with you, they're -- they're still there, and as excited as ever, which is great to see.

It's a very expensive sport to operate in. You look at the capital that's required. Ganassi is a major, major race team. With him having three cars until just recently, I can only image how difficult it is for him to shut down that third team, and how tough it must be to raise sponsorship right now.

I'm very fortunate to have Lowe's as a primary sponsor, along with a lot of other great sponsors we do. And it's -- it's even tough for a big company like Lowe's right now in this tough market. So, we're feeling it, but I really think our fans will support us through thick and thin, and they're doing that now.

MS. SMITH: Speaking of your sponsors, are they making any noise about pulling back? Is their financial commitment strong?

MR. JOHNSON: You know, from my standpoint, I don't think we have heard anything. We, last year, had Dale Earnhardt, Jr. join our race team -- and with, I think, probably one of the largest contracts, or sponsorship packages, inside the sport, or ever in the sport. We have a driver change taking place next year with Mark Martin coming on board. The sponsors that have been involved with Kelloggs and CARQUEST on that #5 car are still there.

And I think it's tough on people, but at Hendrick Motorsports where I drive, Mr. Hendrick works hard to do a lot of business-to-

business work with these sponsors. So that when it comes down to tough times, they look at their NASCAR program and don't think of it just as a marketing exercise, they look at it -- it has some value and some worth to it. And that's part of the -- part of the thing is to drive for a great race team, which I do, and a great businessman, which Rick Hendrick is.

MS. SMITH: A person asks, has the economic downturn changed your charitable giving?

MR. JOHNSON: Not mine. We have definitely seen an effect with the sponsorship packages showing in our golf tournament. We find that people are willing to come out and spend the money to buy foursomes, and support the Foundation on a small degree, but the corporate involvement's been -- been a little tough to round up right now.

MS. SMITH: Has it been difficult to wrap your head around the marketing of your celebrity?

MR. JOHNSON: You know, it is a challenge because it's really tough to take yourself, and put it over here on a piece of paper, and talk about it in a group of people -- like, okay, yeah, the Jimmie Johnson brand is this.

And it's tough to talk about yourself in that way, but you know, I have a great group of people that work with me, a great office. And I think the key to it all is the sponsor that we have with Lowe's -- what their core beliefs are and what they are about. Their marketing program -- everything that they have really fits what I'm about. And I think the sponsors work hard to make sure they somebody that really represents their brand.

So to expand on that -- has it been easy? It's been funny at times to look at, but in all honesty, it's been a great partnership and easy to pull stuff off.

MS. SMITH: In the 1970s, races were shortened to conserve fuel. Should NASCAR take that step today?

MR. JOHNSON: That's a good question. I wasn't aware of the races being shortened in the '70s due to fuel. (Laughter.)

It is a tough -- it's a tough topic right now. I mean, I think that we need to be smart; we need to be creative looking at alternative fuel sources. You know, we're -- the next year's going to be a challenge for this sport, but I think that we've made a lot of great changes within the sport. I think there are a lot of great new things right there on the fringe for us -- for motorsports to look at. But I have not heard anything about shortening the events due to fuel consumption. There's an argument that the events could be a little shorter for the viewing audience or for television. I've heard that, I guess, more than I have about the fuel.

MS. SMITH: Actually, there are several questions about the fuel.

One of them is: Is there anything inappropriate about a sport that's based on fuel consumption when the prices are so high?

MR. JOHNSON: I'm not sure I'm fit to comment. (Laughter.)

MS. SMITH: Talk yourself out of a job -- go ahead -- on national TV! (Laughter.)

MR. JOHNSON: I pay for my fuel that goes into my Chevy Tahoe, but I don't pay for the fuel that goes into the racecar.

MS. SMITH: Apparently, you drive a hybrid. So the questioner says: Tell us about your hybrid and the irony of a NASCAR driver driving a fuel-efficient car.

MR. JOHNSON: Well, the tough part is to find the ethanol to put in the car. I think there are some great alternatives out there and I want to do my part, even though it might sound crazy -- being a racecar driver.

But I think, you know, there's a lot of technology coming. We all need to be smart and be aware of what we're doing. We've gone through the house and we're changing all the light bulbs with those crazy looking light bulbs to make sure we save energy.

You know, I love our world; I want to do my part in our world; and I certainly try to be smart in any aspect on energy and fuel.

MS. SMITH: How many E85 pumps are there in Charlotte?

MR. JOHNSON: I haven't found one yet. (Laughter.)

MS. SMITH: So you've got a hybrid car that you can't drive on ethanol?

MR. JOHNSON: Well, I'm not home a lot, so that's how I save fuel. (Laughter.)

MS. SMITH: The questioner says: NASCAR switched to unleaded gas this year -- 37 years after passenger cars did. What difference has it made to the sport?

MR. JOHNSON: Well, to be honest with you, leaded fuel -- there's a lot of properties with the lead in the fuel that helps the high-performance engine stay running. So we have seen a big change in reliability in the engines and we've had to work very hard to bring that reliability back. There's something in the way the lead burns in a combustion chamber that kind of lubricates and takes care of those parts and pieces.

So it's been -- it's been a learning process and we've had a lot of R&D to get it right.

MS. SMITH: Somebody says: Do you think Saturday night races at local racetracks are in peril because of the costs?

MR. JOHNSON: I do. You know, at the end of the day, motorsports is really, really expensive. Even though local levels will go and race and you have the local racer that has the local tire shop on his

racecar or the pizza shop -- whatever it may be. You can't do it on your own. There's very few people that can afford to go racing, even at a local level on your own.

So when you have a tough market and tough economy like we do right now, I think everybody's pulling back. So all of those reasons, you know, kind of total -- add up and you see it on the big side of it at NASCAR events, but they still do carry over and down through the smaller racing level.

One that we see right now that's impacting short-track racing and the grassroots of motorsports is land. You know, all these racetracks that were built in areas that were far removed 15, 20 years ago are now in the heart of whatever new, thriving city that's coming along. So we've seen a lot of racetracks fight their struggles to even stay open.

MS. SMITH: Somebody sent in this question: NASCAR has tried for the past decade to clean up its image and drivers have had the fines to prove it. But this year, supposedly, NASCAR was going to let drivers be more themselves -- show their anger or frustration, whatever. What's been the result?

MR. JOHNSON: Well, it's been exciting, I think. (Laughter.)

MS. SMITH: Would that be an understatement?

MR. JOHNSON: That's an understatement.

You know, I still think, though, in the scheme of things -- you know, our sport is a contact sport from time to time. And we are so nice at being mean to one another it's ridiculous. And I'm guilty as can be for that. You know, I rarely say anything wrong. You know, try to do my best to represent my sponsors. But when I think and imagine what goes on on a football field and what those guys must really say to each other as they're lining up getting ready to run into each other, we're pretty kind in our sport. (Laughter.) We are. We are very kind.

MS. SMITH: All right. This is on (oaths ?).

After races, do you ever listen to the playbacks of what other drivers were saying to their pits?

MR. JOHNSON: I can't say that immediately following a race I do. We have 560 employees at Hendrick Motorsports that builds the four racecars that we take to the track each week. Well, there's more than four cars. There's four teams.

We have engineers that are just -- we have 60 or 70 engineers. And all they do is take notations, listen to the stuff that takes place on the radio and try to figure how we can maybe use those adjustments. So I know somebody's listening. I typically don't go through it, but it really is amazing to see the effort that goes into our sport.

It looks like it's an individual sport with the driver. You

know, I'm the only one in the car, but at a pit stop, you have seven guys that go over the wall. We have probably 15 crewmembers per team at the track each week and that backs up to the 560 that we have at the shop. We build every part that NASCAR will allow us. Some guys even build the parts that aren't allowed, right Carter? Oh, he's not paying attention. (Laughter.)

So there's a lot that goes into the sport and it really is a team sport. And it's amazing the stuff that we design and make and build and document throughout the course of the season just so we can make ourselves better.

MS. SMITH: So what are these parts that aren't allowed?
(Laughter.)

MR. JOHNSON: He's still not paying attention. (Laughter.)

MR. : (Off mike.) (Laughter.)

MR. JOHNSON: Forty-eight cars have been docked 150 points, \$100,000. (Laughter.)

Okay. I like this.

So the Daytona 500 -- I guess maybe you're supposed to read it. I was just thinking about it. I'm not sure it's a question.

MR. : (Off mike.)

MS. SMITH: Okay. Well, we'll read that in a minute.

North Carolina is acknowledged as the home of NASCAR, but I must defend the Hoosier state. As you know, I work for an Indiana newspaper. Drivers from Indiana include Ryan Newman, Tony Stewart, Jeff Gordon, John Andretti, David Stremme, Tony Raines. Wouldn't you agree that Indiana is the new hotbed of NASCAR?

MR. JOHNSON: Indy does have a great racing presence with the 500 being there. You find there are more teams based in Indiana that race in any car series.

North Carolina -- Charlotte for that matter -- has been the hotbed for NASCAR teams. Really, every team is based there. NASCAR has the new offices that are there as well. And kind of the working core group of guys are based all in North Carolina. They still have their presence in Daytona Beach, but Charlotte really is kind of the hub for all of NASCAR -- NASCAR racing, I should say.

The interesting thing, though, is there are more drivers from the state of California than any other state. And you think of the roots and the history of the sport, you wouldn't expect that or draw that conclusion. And you have drivers coming in from all forms of car racing, and even guys that have had a (tool ?) background now trying to find their way into the sport.

So for that matter, you look at Dario, who you were speaking of earlier; Juan Pablo Montoya, who came over from F1; David Coulthard,

the current F1 driver that stopped by and was looking at our sport recently. Our sport has a lot of attention not only here in North America, but worldwide now.

MS. SMITH: I noticed that you didn't quite answer my question, but we'll let that --

MR. JOHNSON: We'll get it back.

MS. SMITH: (Laughter.) So do you have any desire to cross over and try your luck in the Indy 500?

MR. JOHNSON: I really do. I would love to race in the Indy 500. The problem we have right now is the start times of the 500. There's not enough time from that to my duties that would need to take place in Charlotte -- the 600-mile race that we have there.

MS. SMITH: You don't have a private jet?

MR. JOHNSON: I do, but it still wouldn't matter. (Laughter.) It still wouldn't -- it still wouldn't work out. They would have to move the start time up probably by three hours in order to make that work. There's a rumor floating around that they may entertain that thought or move the Indy 500 to another day like Monday to allow this to happen.

And if that does take place, I'll do everything in my power to compete in that event.

There's some other events I'd love to race in as well. I think that the 24 Hours of Le Mans is just an amazing event and something that I want to compete in. I've been racing in the Grand Am series -- there's a 24-hour race that takes place in Daytona, and all that's just to get me more experience in these different types of vehicles, so that hopefully one day I can race in that event, too.

MS. SMITH: We'll look forward to it.

At NASCAR races, some fans sometimes display Confederate flags. NASCAR does not permit those flags on any elements it controls. But could more be done to discourage the display of symbols that many Americans find offensive?

MR. JOHNSON: I think you can always do more; there's no doubt about it. The problem is, you know, it's -- fan comes and drives their vehicle in and they buy their ticket to watch the race and you can't control every aspect of that, so it's really something that they need to look in the mirror at themselves at than what I can. I mean, I conduct and carry myself in a certain way. NASCAR does as well. And my team and everybody that's involved, I don't think anybody's out there endorsing anybody to be rude or offensive on any front. And hopefully the world's changing and people want to be kind and we lose some of these ridiculous, you know, attitudes that they may have.

MS. SMITH: Have you ever specifically asked your fans not to display Confederate flags?

MR. JOHNSON: I personally have not. I wasn't aware that there was a problem of any sort. I think my fan base is much different than the core fan base in a lot of ways. I end up with the metropolitan fan and I know there's some other drivers that have more of a core NASCAR fan from this type of mindset, but I don't think that my fans -- I haven't seen any. I say this and tomorrow it'll be on the front paper somewhere but -- you know, it'll be on the headlines but I wasn't aware there was a problem either.

MS. SMITH: So why do you think your core fan base is metropolitan?

MR. JOHNSON: We do a lot of research trying to understand, you know, our fan base not only for myself, but also the sponsors do as well to understand if they're spending money in the right areas. There's a large part of our business in licensed souvenir sales, so you're trying to pinpoint your fan base, where they are, what they like to purchase and to kind of tailor your program to those fans. So we see a lot of different numbers through all of that.

MS. SMITH: Could you talk a minute about the marketing of the souvenirs and how that might be different from a different driver?

MR. JOHNSON: Yeah. You know -- it's different, the souvenir market has kind of taken a downturn for -- to a certain degree. You look at what was taking place back in the late '90s and there was a huge craze that anything that had a special paint, any race team had a special paint scheme, the die cast car souvenirs would fly off the shelves, t-shirts, hats, and it's a tougher market today and I think the economy certainly has a part in that. But it's kind of flattened out over the last few years and certainly trend down from the late '90s when the souvenirs were just going crazy within our sport.

But, you know, somebody like Dale Jr. seems to have the southern core fan base, you can -- I don't know what a good example is but you know, they're the guys at the tracks with the coolers and they want their Dale Earnhardt, Jr. cooler to go to the race track with them where, you know, my fan base likes more of a relaxed khaki hat and something that they would wear on the golf course. So, you know, it's just two totally different fan bases, and it's great. I think that's why I sport is so successful. Because you have all 43 stars on track every week and we all appeal to different fans and different people across the country. So that's why the corporate sponsorship is there like it is and why the fans show up and some tracks will seat 260,000 fans and that's -- that's just there watching it -- you know, and then you have all the millions watching on television.

MS. SMITH: My buddy Billy Ray Hawkins who races in Fort Wayne says the hardest ticket in night racing is Bristol, yet the tracks built in the last 10 years have the same cookie cutter layout. Do you think it's likely that NASCAR or anyone else will build a track that's more interesting?

MR. JOHNSON: (Laughs.) You know, the two organizations that own the tracks, it's really in their vision of what they -- what they think the fans would like. We see a lot of tracks being resurfaced

and reconfigured right now to try to put on more exciting events. At some of the tracks -- but in general you know, the fans have showed their support that they like certain styled tracks and what ultimately shows their support is on attendance. And Bristol is the most sought-after ticket that we have.

It's funny because what interests the fan does not interest the driver. The tracks that I am most concerned about because of the risk that's involved in the points and if you have a bad day and elements out of my control would be Bristol, and we race there twice, Daytona twice and Talladega. So those six events, I love racing on them --

I'd really like to sit in the stands and watch. But when your career's on the line and your championship's on the line, there's so much chaos at those events that, you know, I just -- I hope to get out of there with a straight race car let alone win the event. So it's amazing how, you know, one side wants the action and the drivers are like no, let's all get nice and mellow and back off each other and space, and it's just different opinions.

MS. SMITH: A number of open wheel drivers have come over to NASCAR. Is the verdict still out given that Pablo Montoya is the one who's made a dent?

MR. JOHNSON: Juan Pablo's made a lot of dents, in cars --
(laughter) --

MS. SMITH: Good line.

MR. JOHNSON: -- and I played some golf with him recently and he takes a heck of a divot, too.

No, in all honesty, the -- Juan has done a great job for our sport. I think one of his biggest assets is the fact he's so honest, and that's something that fans have cried out for in our sport. And he's an amazing race car driver. I think it's tough for these open wheel guys -- if you think about just the physics that are involved, they go from a car that is building five times the downforce as one of the NASCAR vehicles does, it's at least half the weight, if not less, so the way you drive that vehicle and attack with it is so different than you do a NASCAR-style vehicle. Those guys in open wheel, especially F1, don't spend a lot of time passing one another -- you're lucky if you see a pass or two throughout the entire event. We run side by side for five hours at a time. So it's -- it's a much different environment. I think Juan has done an amazing job switching over. I'm excited to see these other world-class drivers showing interest in our sport. And, frankly, some of the struggles they go through I think builds a lot of respect for our sport and our drivers because on the world scale, a lot of drivers in Europe and abroad, they don't understand our sport and they're not convinced that we're highly technical drivers and race teams. And I think that these guys coming in has really showed how tough it is to compete in NASCAR and in North America.

MS. SMITH: I assume that drivers consider themselves athletes.

MR. JOHNSON: Absolutely.

MS. SMITH: Should that -- car racing be an Olympic sport?

MR. JOHNSON: I would love to have a shot at gold. (Laughter.) For my own selfish reasons, absolutely. You know, that's -- I don't know. I mean, from my standpoint being a race car, driver I'd say absolutely, but I'm not sure it'll be accepted on a world scale. And the other thing that's tough -- I would think would be tough with that is making sure that the cars were equal and everything would be fair, to really have the talents come out of the driver.

There are some great series that are around that have a lot of parity. NASCAR does a great job at it, but we still have enough room in the rulebook to let technology come through and drivers' skills come through. You look at some of these series that we're around like the IROC series that unfortunately is gone now, they had 12 equally prepared cars, invited drivers from all around the world to come in and race these vehicles and they put on a great show and it was probably the best way that they can try and get all these drivers together and show who was the best. But again there were a lot of them were on ovals so you had these road course drivers thinking well, you know, if this was a true test of every driver and every discipline you'd have road courses in it. It's just tough to pull that element off with the tracks themselves and with the cars.

MS. SMITH: Is it the driver or is it the car?

MR. JOHNSON: All the driver. (Laughter.) Absolutely. The car does a little bit but, you know -- (laughter) -- it is a team effort, it really, really is a team effort. I think that drivers get far more than they deserve with the credits but -- with credit for everything, but the guys that really spend the time and the hours are the crew members. They're working six days a week, especially our road crew guys, they work countless hours to get these cars ready and prepared for me to go out and have my temper come unglued and bump into someone and rip the side off the car. When you get down to it, I think NASCAR does the best job of allowing the driver's skill and the team's skill to come together and work on track.

You look at Indycar, F1, the teams literally monitor the cars from pit road and can make adjustments to the car while it's on track. NASCAR doesn't allow any of that, they keep the human element involved. We take our data acquisitions to test sessions, but we're not allowed to use it on a race weekend.

So the way the driver communicates what the vehicle is doing -- you know, he's really the computer and has to describe those sensations and the train, the surface of the track, where you think the problem is and why it can't go faster and what's uncomfortable, the car set-up. We have to communicate those things between one another.

So I really think that, you know, our sport does the best job of allowing both skill sets to come to the surface, and I think that's what keeps the fans in the stands as well. There's a big human element involved. It's not remote-control cars out there.

MS. SMITH: (Laughs.) You're not saying Indy cars are remote-controlled.

MR. JOHNSON: No, no. Those guys still have to strap in and get the jobs done. But like when Dario was in our sport, talking to Dario, he was so refreshed to see the human element. They would literally get out of their cars and go to their motor home and not discuss what the car was doing with the team because they have everything printed out on a computer screen, and they don't need the driver there. They just have to get in and go. And I think a lot of drivers enjoy that element. It's something that I enjoy and think has worked really well in my career.

MS. SMITH: I wonder if you could talk about the skill set that's necessary for a successful NASCAR driver and talk maybe what are the top two most important qualities or skills to have.

MR. JOHNSON: At this level, nobody's really scared of anything. So it's not that somebody's more courageous than you are in the car. Our vehicles -- if you were in an F-1 car, an Indy car, I think that there is more of a fear factor there because you're on an open-wheeled vehicle. The threshold for the vehicle is higher. In our cars, and with our great drivers, everybody's won championships to have this chance and be where they are.

It really, in my opinion, boils down to eliminating -- in your mind, eliminating all of the stresses that pop up through the event -- how the car is handling; somebody bumped into you and that frustration; what level it is, especially at the end of the race, when you're trying to put yourself in position to win. You have to rule all these things out of your mind and just feel what the car is doing.

And again, we don't have the data on the car, so I have to be able to tell them if I feel like the right front tire is overworked, if the tire pressures were right at the start of a run or at the end of a run, what spring may be causing a problem, what shock absorber may be changing the attitude of the car and allowing it to pick up an air imbalance, or is it a mechanical grip problem. And there's a lot of details you have to sort out. So the more you can clear your head and feel what the car is doing, the better you are. And that's the first element.

The second part of it is you have to describe it to someone. And that's tough. You know, two people communicating and talking the same way and understanding one another is a really tough element in our sport. And you'll see great drivers and crew chiefs that are matched up and that communication factor doesn't work out and they don't have success. And they move around, and the driver will succeed somewhere else with a different crew chief, and the crew chief will succeed with another driver. So those are the two elements, I feel.

MS. SMITH: A very Zen statement -- becoming one with the car.

MR. JOHNSON: I try not to go there. (Laughter.)

MS. SMITH: You've been nominated as best driver in the Espy

awards. What are you doing to notch up your fan voting?

MR. JOHNSON: Anything we can. (Laughter.) I'm glad you brought that up. I forgot about this opportunity. (Laughs.) We certainly put something up on my website. We have a huge fan club with Lowe's. There's over a million fan club members at the Lowe's racing site. So we'll do some creative articles and icons and things all around. It really boils down to the fan base and how they show their support.

MS. SMITH: A couple of questions about diversity. Why the lack of diversity in NASCAR? Is there a Tiger Woods of racing waiting in the wings? And what does NASCAR do to actively recruit female drivers?

MR. JOHNSON: Well, as far as recruiting drivers, motor sports -- there's such a financial backing that's involved. NASCAR is in the business of putting on an event and recruiting drivers and bringing people in. It's so late in the program when you get to the NASCAR touring divisions that the drivers, the crew chiefs, sponsors in some respects, that all starts at such a young age. You have to wake up at five years old like I did and say, "This is what I want to do."

And now that motor sports is a more high-profile sport, I think we have a large group of lady drivers, drivers from all different backgrounds, walks of life, that are coming along and going to be interested in our sport. But it's still going to be another, I think, five or eight years. I mean, when you look at when the sport really hit the scene, some people say 10 years; some would say five. In either case, if there's an aspiring young driver, male or female, coming along, it just takes time to get there.

And I think we have a lot of great drivers coming along from all around our country, if not abroad now. I really think you'll see drivers growing up in Europe that typically would look at go-kart racing and moving into F-1 are now thinking, "Well, I'd love to race closed-body vehicles, and maybe NASCAR would be where I'd want to go."

MS. SMITH: This questioner says, "If you could build your own race track, what would it look like and where would you build it?"

MR. JOHNSON: On a funny note, I would build something with jumps and really get the fans on their feet. (Laughter.) A 200-mile-an-hour double jump would be great.

I really think that there's a couple of markets, a couple of areas, that we need to move into. I think that having a presence in New York would be -- near New York City, near Manhattan, is something that we really need. Also in the Northwest, there's a huge hole out there, unfortunately, as far as race tracks and access to race fans to get to these tracks. But it doesn't mean that we don't have the fans there. We have a huge fan base in that area, and I hope that someday we can get a track in the Northwest so that we can reach those fans a little easier.

MS. SMITH: People keep talking about bringing NASCAR to Long Island. Do you think there will be racing in New York any time soon?

MR. JOHNSON: I hope so. There's been a lot of work on trying to make this happen, trying to find a piece of property. I think there might be some noise issues too as you get those things fired up; traffic problems. You know, there's a lot to consider when you look up in that area. There's not a lot of land left, so I don't know how it's going to -- if it's going to turn out. But I certainly hope that it does.

MS. SMITH: When you and your wife have your private moments and talking about your profession, how do you reassure her about the job you do that is obviously so very dangerous?

MR. JOHNSON: You know, that's a great question. In the beginning, I found that I spent a lot of time taking her to the race shop, showing her the safety advancements that we've made in the sport, the race cars themselves, the HANS device that we actually wear, the seats and how we've developed the seats. I think she probably saw more than she wanted to or needed to, but I really wanted her to be comfortable with that.

And I think the other part that she had to come to grips with is this is what I've always done, and there is an element of risk there. But I'm doing everything I can to make myself safe, to make good decisions on the track. Track operators are installing soft walls. NASCAR is always looking at new technology to make the cars safer. The manufacturers have all united and worked together to make the cars safer and our environments inside the seat safer. So there's a lot of work going on there.

There was a tough period of time after Earnhardt passed and four other drivers in that same time period. But after Earnhardt passed, everything ramped up and we covered a lot of ground in that period of time. And I think, as a driver, when that went on, I lost -- a very close friend of mine was one of those five drivers. It was tough to get back in the car.

But as time has gone on and we've seen the threshold be raised in the Gs that a driver can take, you know, I don't know if it's just the way I'm programmed, but I feel safer than ever in our vehicles. And I think she, through all of that, can sense, you know, where the sport is at and finds a lot of comfort in that.

MS. SMITH: Is anybody going to keep pace with Toyota?

MR. JOHNSON: We're just giving them a head start, that's all. (Laughter.) You know, Toyota has done a great job coming in the sport. And not to take away from what they've done, I look at the race team. Joe Gibbs Racing is a great, great race team. And those guys have -- the last year or two have been a little quiet for them due to -- you know, up to their standards. But this year they have come out swinging, and they're doing a great job. And they've set the mark so far.

But our sport is cyclical, and last year we were unstoppable, and this year it seems like the Gibbs group. And Roush has been not off to a good start at the start of the season, but we're hopeful that all

changes. We feel we're making a lot of progress right now, and we hope that when we roll into the chase for the championship, that Hendrick is where it needs to be. And I'm hoping that 48 car is where it needs to be.

MS. SMITH: Do you have full sponsorship for the 2009 season?

MR. JOHNSON: We do. My contract with Hendrick Motor Sports and the partners that we have on the race car, including Lowe's, is through 2010.

MS. SMITH: This questioner says, "As the defending Cup champ, you're fifth in points but only have one win. What's the greatest challenge in repeating as champion?"

MR. JOHNSON: As far as repeating, I think last year's experience was less stressful for me going through it all.

So I see a lot of positives when I look at my mental state and where I need to be in the car and what I need to do. I'll find a lot of confidence and a lot of comfort in the fact that I've been there, done that. That I've won the races, won the championship. And it really helped me think more clearly and be focused on the right things fighting last year's championship battle.

But repeating -- you know, you hang onto things. The future goes by and mainly things what not to do and make sure that you don't put yourself in that situation again. But it's so tough from year to year to think that competition's going to be the same and the same circumstances are going to come up.

This year we have the car of tomorrow that's on the circuit full time. And we didn't race it last year on the mile-and-a-half track. So we've been playing catch up in that department. So when I look at last year's championship, there's a lot -- I don't think there's a lot that I can pull from, except the pressure and stress that I went through.

And I said it before I won my first championship: I would first give the -- make the favorite the guy that's won multiple championships, because they've been there and they've felt that. So I'd kind of give Jeff that head start and then Tony Stewart. I have a few now. Matt Kenseth. You know, these guys -- when you get down to the chase and it's time to go, as the guy who hasn't won the championship, you're shaking in your shoes. It's really a tough thing to deal with and to work through.

But you know, repeating was a very special thing for me. I wasn't sure I was going to win once, so to win back-to-back championships and now being in a position where I can hopefully win a third. Just being competitive and knowing that I have a shot at it is all that I can really ask for and hope for. And we'll just have to get in there and see what we're going to do.

MS. SMITH: Questioner says: How are you going to catch Number 18 car?

MR. JOHNSON: I've got to go fast! (Laughter). Doesn't matter the type of track -- he's winning on it right now. You know, we just have to work hard.

And our sport and the rules that we have are tighter than they have ever been. So it's nothing big that we're missing. It's just a series of small things that we have to get right and that's why we work real hard on it. So hard work, really, is the way we catch them.

MS. SMITH: What are your feelings about Casey Mears departure and having Mark Martin as a teammate?

MR. JOHNSON: It's tough with Casey. We've been great friends and teammates really -- we were both teenagers at the time when we first met and were teammates. I was so happy for him to come into motorsports and have a shot there; and unfortunately, it didn't work out. It's been extremely tough on Casey and it's been tough as a friend and teammate to know that he's going to depart now. And watching him try to find a new job. And he's an extremely talented driver and I think that he'll land on his feet here and end up with a great ride.

At the same time, it's difficult because Mark Martin is Mark Martin and he's such an amazing driver. I don't think there's anyone out there that wouldn't like to see him win a championship and to win races. He is -- he's been in the sport and has dedicated his life to it. And it's going to be an honor to have him on the race team. It really is.

He has great mind-set and great attitude, very thankful for everything that's gone on in his career. And I think he's going to be an uplifting -- one of those guys that lifts the team up and really props up the guys and puts them on a pedestal, so that when they're working their seventh thing in a row trying to get our cars ready to go for the 500 next year, you know, they have that pride. And Mark really builds that pride within race teams.

MS. SMITH: The Brickyard 400, which you won in 2006, is in three weeks. How do you assess the track, the race, the competitors?

MR. JOHNSON: It's an amazing event. It really is. I always wanted to race at Indy, but as a kid in terms of being there in an Indy car. So to go back and be there in a stockcar is quite a thrill. To win the race has been a huge accomplishment for myself.

The other three races, I think -- no, I've been there more than that. I've only won it once and the other races I've either been on fire, crashed. It's been a pretty bad record for me. I don't think I've finished all but one and won it. So I hope to go back and win it again. But it's quite an event.

It's tough for us to race stockcars there. It's a pretty flat track. The banking really helps our cars stick, but it's certainly a challenging place and there's nothing like it. It is quite a unique racetrack.

MS. SMITH: Questioner says: Do you think "Talladega Nights" was an accurate portrayal of NASCAR? How about "Days of Thunder"? (Laughter.)

MR. JOHNSON: I don't think either are an accurate one. I'm trying to think -- what's his name with the -- (inaudible) -- car? Do you remember any of this?

MS. SMITH: No.

MR. JOHNSON: No. Some great stuff, though.

I haven't seen anyone run around in their helmet and underwear asking for Tom Cruise either. So they were great. I think they did a lot for our sport, but they were certainly -- "Days of Thunder" it wasn't necessarily a spoof, but with Tom Cruise being involved with it and the success the movie had, it had to help our sport. It really had to help it and help it move along.

But as a driver watching, you know, I'm sure when pilots watched "Top Gun" they were like, that's not right. That's not accurate. So yeah, there's certain parts of that that as a driver, I watch them and see. But they're both great movies and helped the sport.

MS. SMITH: Is it true your car owner and Montoya can beat you at golf?

MR. JOHNSON: I wonder where that came from. (Laughter.)

Gordon -- Jeff played golf. I think he was in the Bob Hope Classic and he shanked one, and unfortunately, it struck a woman in the head. So since that moment, he's been very iffy about playing golf and doesn't really play. So I can beat Gordon at golf. Now, Montoya, on the other hand, is very good. So I don't think I have a chance of beating him.

MS. SMITH: Well, I was going to ask what it's like to race against your boss, but obviously, the competitive spirit by telling that story is showing.

We're almost out of time. And before I ask the last question, I have a couple of things I want to tell the audience.

First, our upcoming speakers include Joseph Ackerman, chairman of the Board of Directors of the Institute of International Finance and CEO of Deutsche Bank. He'll be here July 17th. On August 6th we have Tim Pawlenty, who's the governor of Minnesota. On September 10th, James Mulva, chairman, president and CEO of ConocoPhillips.

And I'd also like to remind you that on September 13th is our annual 5K run-walk, which raised money for our scholarship program. So I hope you will all join uphill -- (inaudible) -- with Sylvia. My team.

Second, I'd like to present our guest with this mug -- famous National Press Club mug with Eric Sevareid.

And for the last question, because you've been such a good guest, I'm going to give you your choice of two questions. You may answer either.

MR. JOHNSON: May?

MS. SMITH: May.

MR. JOHNSON: Or have to?

MS. SMITH: Have to. (Laughter.)

Which presidential candidate do you think NASCAR fans will warm up to fastest? (Laughter.) Or what did you get your wife for her birthday next week?

MR. JOHNSON: What happens if I don't answer either? (Laughter.)

MS. SMITH: Just stand there for a while.

MR. JOHNSON: Perfect. We have what, five minutes, four minutes? (Laughter.)

I can't tell the birthday thing, because her birthday is coming up next week and I can't ruin the gift that I worked so hard for. She's going to be 21, so this is fantastic. (Laughter.) Twenty-first birthday.

Does that help me or hurt me? Am I done yet?

MS. SMITH: (Off mike.)

MR. JOHNSON: Oh, okay, the other one. I almost forgot about that one. I'd have to think McCain.

MS. SMITH: Yeah? Why?

MR. JOHNSON: I think that our core fan base, and being strong Republicans like they are, that that's going to be the first choice. And I also think his credits and history and what he's done for our country -- serving for our country -- a lot of those things won't go -- you know, will be noticed within our fan base.

Does that work?

MS. SMITH: That works. Thank you very much for coming. Appreciate it. (Applause.)

I'd like to thank you for coming today, Jimmie Johnson. I'd like to thank you for attending.

I'd also like to thank the National Press Club staff members Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, Jo Anne Booz and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. Also, thanks to the NPC library for its research.

The video archive of today's luncheon is provided by the National

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Thank you. We're adjourned. (Sounds gavel.)

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