

Jimmie Johnson has long career ahead to sell to sponsors

By JENNA FRYER
Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Jimmie Johnson has a reputation as a bland and boring NASCAR champion, a guy who loves his ice cream the same way he presents himself — plain and vanilla.

The reputation was earned through his workmanlike approach while winning five straight NASCAR titles. Boring he is not.

Johnson's commitment to excellence in everything he does makes him not just one of the greatest drivers in NASCAR history but also one of the most well-rounded and interesting athletes in the world. Now he gets to show that because Lowe's is leaving the sport after 18 years as the only Cup Series sponsor Johnson has ever had.

Eighty-three victories in that Lowe's-branded No. 48 Chevrolet.

All those titles. A unique sportsman for Hendrick Motorsports to sell.

And Johnson believes he is more than just a driver looking for a new paint scheme that can be auctioned off to the highest bidder.

At 42, Johnson is still a top driver and adamant that retirement is nowhere on his radar. Yet the statistics and history of NASCAR are clear: The twilight of his career has arrived and he's got to sell something besides winning.

"I think for this seller's market, clearly someone has a golden opportunity to close out with me," Johnson said during an interview with The Associated Press.

Johnson doesn't know when that is, but he does have a grand plan that



AP Photo/AJ Mast

In this July 26, 2015, file photo, Sprint Cup Series driver Jimmie Johnson (48) runs to his car before the NASCAR Brickyard 400 auto race at Indianapolis Motor Speedway in Indianapolis. Johnson's alarm clock beeps at 4:30 a.m. His wife and two daughters are still sleeping. So are his fellow NASCAR drivers.

could include everything from driving Le Mans and the Rolex 24 at Daytona to competitive mountain biking — anything that allows the California son of two working parents to chase his desire to win and avoid retirement.

"I know I can't turn off the competition," he said. "I don't think I've ever been more motivated; I don't think I've ever wanted anything more. I want to race and I want to win and I want to do that for a very long time. Me being selfish about what I want to do, the next sponsor transitions with me."

Johnson has matured from the rookie who did the things young men just becoming famous sometimes do. Like the time he broke his wrist but lied about how it happened so he didn't have to tell Lowe's or team owner Rick Hendrick he was surfing

on top of a golf cart during a rowdy outing with his friends. He still has fun, but now he runs triathlons, takes team members mountain biking in the woods and will do anything to get a workout in.

Alas, he is mired in the longest losing streak of his Cup career: 31 races stretching back almost a year. He turns 43 in September and has two years remaining on his Hendrick contract; there might be another short NASCAR contract after that.

"I've got a handful of years in Cup," he said, leaving himself wiggle room regarding just how many. "If we can find the right sponsor to transition from full-time NASCAR ... I mean, I can't stop racing. I'm always going to be racing something. I'm going to step down from the NASCAR merry-go-round at some point, but I've got a

bucket list."

Johnson got to thinking after a chance encounter in January with two-time Formula One champion Fernando Alonso, who is on a quest to race in the top events around the world. Alonso entered the Indianapolis 500 last year, led laps, but failed to finish after his engine blew.

What about the Indianapolis 500, the race he most admired as a child but has been barred from racing by his wife?

"I like those halos in Formula One. Those could get me a little closer to that race," Johnson said.

For now, Johnson remains firmly committed to himself and pursuit of a record eighth championship.

But he knows what he is up against.

There has been a total rebuild at Hendrick Motorsports and Chevrolet rolled

Truex claims pole at Richmond

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — Martin Truex Jr. won the pole Friday for the NASCAR Cup Series race Saturday at Richmond Raceway, edging Chase Elliott.

The pole is the series-best third of the season for Truex, the 18th of his career and his first at the 0.75-mile oval.

It's also a nice turnaround after finishing 37th and 30th in the past two races. Before that, he'd had five straight top-five finishes.

Truex's winning lap came at 123.859 mph.

Defending race winner Joey Logano will start third, followed by Denny Hamlin. Kyle Busch, seeking his third consecutive victory in the series, made a miscalculation during the opening round of qualifying, making only two laps and thinking it would be enough. It wasn't, and he finished 31st in the round.

Busch isn't the only prominent name starting in the back half of the field. Brad Keselowski will start 28th and Kasey Kahne 29th.

Saturday's race is expected to start at 3:30 p.m. and will be televised on FOX.

out a new Camaro. Johnson blames neither the car nor his young new teammates for his struggles. He has used this period to take on a bigger role and fill the shoes of four-time champion Jeff Gordon.

Johnson sought help from former NFL player Leonard Wheeler, who is now a performance coach, and he learned how to better communicate with crew chief Chad Knaus.

"I'm one that clams up and gets quiet when things get tough, and Chad can make things tough," Johnson said. "I found that the team doesn't need me to be quiet and the team suffers from it, so I've made some huge strides in growth in that department."

A swimmer, diver and water polo player in high school, Johnson realized he did best in a locker-room environment, which doesn't exist in racing. He has learned to recognize what triggers Knaus and come to understand how to confront each issue.

At the end of last season, he said, he was so shut down that he and Knaus were not discussing problems. Crew members began whispering about friction and "it was just toxic," Johnson said.

"I know I am going to flourish and do a better job and be who I need to be in that type of (locker-room) environment, so I am going to create it," Johnson said.

Roundup: Echo softball thumps Umatilla with 23 hits, 35 runs in DH

Continued from 1B

while tallying eight strikeouts. Adrian Roa pitched a perfect seventh for the save.

Lino Covarrubia led the Knights with two hits including a home run, while Johnny Phillips had two hits with a double and Keith Fleming had a double.

The Knights' pitching didn't fare as well in Game 2, as five different pitchers combined to walk 15 batters and allow five hits with 12 runs. The defense also recorded a whopping eight errors.

Covarrubia was the team's only multi-hit performance going 2-for-3.

Game 1	BHS	000200	0	2	6	0	R	H	E
	IHS	001022	X	5	7	1			

(B) Tiller, L. Bailey (6). (I) Z. Henrichs, A. Roa (7). W — Henrichs, L — Tiller. 2B — Case (BHS); K. Fleming, J. Phillips (IHS). HR — L. Covarrubia (IHS).

Game 2	BHS	253011	—	12	5	0	R	H	E
	IHS <td>010010 <td>— <td>2 <td>6 <td>8 <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </td></td></td></td></td>	010010 <td>— <td>2 <td>6 <td>8 <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </td></td></td></td>	— <td>2 <td>6 <td>8 <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </td></td></td>	2 <td>6 <td>8 <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </td></td>	6 <td>8 <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </td>	8 <td></td> <td></td> <td></td>			

(B) Z. Bailey, Winn (2). (I) L. Covarrubia, B. Harrington (1), M. Moreno (2), J. Phillips (4), A. Roa (5). W — Winn, L — Harrington. 2B — T. Case, Winn (BHS).

Mariners: Hernandez gave up four hits and two runs in 5 1/3 innings

Continued from 1B

Kela hadn't given up a run in his first six appearances covering 5 1/3 innings. The hard-throwing right-hander fell behind all four hitters, and three of the four runs in the ninth were charged to him.

"Coming in a 2-2 game, I ntpicked a little bit," Kela said. "I was trying to make the best pitch instead of just focus on making the most quality pitch that I could. I guess I could say that I'm glad I got it out of the way now. I take this as a

Holford had two hits with a double, Uriel Garcia had two hits with a double and two RBI and Cody Samson had two hits with a triple and two RBI.

Kole Keller pitched seven strong innings in Game 1, allowing nine hits with eight runs (three earned) and eight strikeouts. Cody Samson pitched a complete game in Game 2.

Keegan Mizuta hit a triple and a grand slam home run to lead Vale (8-6, 6-1).

Game 1	VHS	100221	2	—	8	9	1	R	H	E
	UHS <th>010000</th> <th>3</th> <th>—</th> <th>4</th> <th>7</th> <th>6</th> <th></th> <th></th> <th></th>	010000	3	—	4	7	6			

(V) M. McBride, K. Mizuta (7). (U) K. Keller. W — McBride, L — Keller. 2B — S. Cranston, N. Holford (UHS). 3B — K. Mizuta (VHS).

Game 2	VHS	005303	0	—	11	11	1	R	H	E
	UHS <th>060002</th> <th>0</th> <th>—</th> <th>8</th> <th>7</th> <th>3</th> <th></th> <th></th> <th></th>	060002	0	—	8	7	3			

(V) K. Brown, C. Kesey (6). (U) C. Samson. W — Brown, L — Samson. 2B — U. Garcia (UHS). 3B — C. Samson (UHS). HR — K. Mizuta (VHS).

SOFTBALL RIVERSIDE 4-5, WESTON-MCEWEN 3-1

At Boardman, the Riverside Pirates notched their first league victories of the season by sweeping Weston-McEwen 4-3 and 7-2 on Friday.

In Game 1, the Pirates (5-5 overall, 2-1 Special District 1) trailed the TigerScots (2-10, 1-3) 3-2 in the bottom of the seventh before it got a rally going. Skylar Wightman was hit by a pitch and then JoJo Hernandez and Ray Elliott each singled to lead the bases. Next, Megan

Hegar stepped to the plate and delivered a single to right field to score Wightman and Hernandez to deliver the 4-3 win.

Hernandez, Elliot and Hegar each had two hits in the game for the Pirates, and Wightman earned the win with 10 strikeouts in seven innings while allowing nine hits and three runs.

Lilyan Duckett had two hits for the TigerScots and pitched a solid seven innings allowing 11 hits and four runs.

In Game 2, the Pirates controlled from the start to lead 5-0 after three innings. Abby Hernandez and Wightman each had three hits to lead the Pirates, while JoJo Hernandez had two hits and Delmy Barrera had a double. Tyree Burke led the TigerScots with two hits.

Wightman also earned the win for the Pirates and punched out 11 batters while allowing only four hits with two runs.

Game 1	W-M	000101	1	—	3	9	0	R	H	E
	RHS	000020	2	—	4	11	0			

W — S. Wightman, L — L. Duckett. 2B — J. Lambert (W-M).

ECHO 19-16, UMATILLA 1-1

At Umatilla, the Echo Cougars tallied 23 hits and scored 35 runs as they thumped the Umatilla Vikings in a league

doubleheader on Friday.

The Cougars (11-2 overall, 6-0 Special District 1) were led by dazzling starts by pitchers Alyssa Ray and Kendra Hart. Ray threw five innings and struck out seven while allowing two hits and one run in Game 1, and Hart struck out 10 in five innings with four hits and one run allowed in Game 2.

Hart was the team's top hitter with four hits, a home run and a triple, two RBI and six runs scored. Ray also had four hits with six RBI, while Alex Putman homered and Monique Montoya tallied three hits with three RBI.

Charlene Alvarez and Stephanie Griggs each had two hits to lead the Vikings (0-9, 0-5)

Game 1	EHS	673 12	—	19	10	2	R	H	E
	UHS	000 10	—	1	2	6			

(E) A. Ray and A. Putman. (U) K. Holz, B. Martinez (3), Gabriella Rodarte (5). W — Ray, L — Holz. 2B — K. Perkins, A. Putman (EHS). 3B — K. Hart (EHS).

Game 2	EHS	534 40	—	16	13	1	R	H	E
	UHS	000 01	—	1	4	5			

(E) K. Hart and A. Putman. (U) P. Picker, K. Holz (2). W — Hart, L — Picker. 2B — L. Keltz, M. Montoya (EHS); C. Alvarez (UHS). HR — K. Hart, A. Putman (EHS).

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