

Jimmy Johnson: all fired up

by Bill Center

Jimmie Johnson has been on fire - recently, literally more than figuratively.

Last Sunday at Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Johnson was involved in a fiery crash.

"That's the first time I've ever had flames inside the car with me," Johnson said Tuesday. "It's something I haven't seen before, nor want to see again. An oil line broke on impact and the flames just followed the oil into the car."

The accident knocked Johnson out of the race - a second straight did-not-finish for NASCAR's reigning Nextel Cup champion. Over the past three races - in which he placed 10th, 37th and 39th - Johnson has tumbled from fourth to ninth in the standings.

Suddenly, Johnson is closer to missing the Chase for the Championship - as 2005 series champion Tony Stewart did last year - than defending his crown during NASCAR's "playoffs."

Still, the El Cajon, Calif., native remains upbeat.

"If we weren't running strong, I'd be more concerned," said Johnson. "But the cars have been good. We've been running up front when things have gone wrong. We've had blown tires, accidents that weren't our fault and some parts failed.

"When luck changes, you can pile up some low finishes and lose a lot of points. We've just had some crazy luck. This is just our turn to kind of go through that."

Johnson is aware he's not the only person going through a run of bad luck, which is why he quickly changed topics Tuesday to his charity golf tournament Aug. 29 at River Walk in San Diego.

Aside from some hole sponsorships, the event is sold out. Forty-eight foursomes - some including other NASCAR drivers and members of the Padres - have committed to the event benefiting the Jimmie Johnson Foundation and Habitat for Humanity.

Proceeds will not only help Habitat for Humanity build a new home in Harbison Canyon - just east and down the hill from the Crest home in which the stock car superstar was raised - they will provide funding for a new home plus equipment for the Harbison Canyon Volunteer Fire Department.

"We're buying the land from the fire department," said Johnson. "The money we pay for the land will help them buy new equipment. And Habitat for Humanity will use the land we're buying to build a new home for a family that needs a home.

"Pretty exciting the way it worked out."

Johnson said he expects to raise between \$200,000 and \$300,000 from what he wants to be an annual fundraising event in San Diego County.

"Each year, I'd like to have a fundraiser as a lead-in to a local project," said Johnson. "I can't say what the project will always be or how we'll raise the funds each year. But every year, I want to do something in San Diego and for San Diego, particularly the East County, where I grew up.

"Our little foundation can make a difference in the East County. I don't think anyone is really doing things like this out there. That's why I wanted to get back close to my home and do something where I grew up."

Johnson's sponsor, Lowe's, has ties to Habitat for Humanity, which made this first project a natural. But Johnson believes he has interested people in various divisions of several local industries, including construction, who can carry on in the future.

"My eyes have been really opened to the prospects," said Johnson. "And Lowe's is on board with me.

"To be honest, I didn't really know if anyone in San Diego remembered me when I first got to NASCAR. I had been away for a while and I really wasn't a big name when I raced in San Diego.

"But then I started having friends calling me from San Diego to say they were seeing cars with the "48" stickers on the streets. And I got a bigger feeling for how I was recognized in San Diego when I opened my (Chevy) dealership on Kearny Mesa.

"The way this event has been received has blown me away. It's gotten bigger than I expected with more backing than I expected. I've got friends out there I never knew about and people who want to be my partners in this program. Welcome to everyone. I'm really looking forward to the 29th."

And to Labor Day weekend, which will feature the season's second Nextel Cup race at California Speedway in Fontana - the penultimate Nextel Cup event before the 12-car field for the Chase for the Championship is finalized.

It is still three weeks until Johnson regains the services of suspended crew chief Chad Knaus (he returns Aug. 19 at Michigan) and while he doesn't blame his team's current problems on the absence of Knaus, he'll be happy to see the crew chief return.

"He adds a great deal of leadership at the track," said Johnson. "He's just the team leader, a last level of confidence."

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