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NASCAR focuses on kids, outdoors

By Steve Ballard

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The wildfires that swept through Southern California in October, leaving thousands homeless, hit close to home for two-time NASCAR champion Jimmie Johnson. The neighborhood in which he grew up in El Cajon, Calif., was among those charred by the blaze.

"For whatever reason, the fire leapfrogged the house that I grew up in and got the surrounding homes," he said at the time. "So many fires and so much devastation. It's the worst reality you would ever face living out there."

Powerless to alter that reality, Johnson at least had the means to make it more palpable. Within a week after pledging to donate whatever he won from the Oct. 28 race in Atlanta, he was able to organize a contribution of more than \$1 million to the American Red Cross fire relief fund.

Johnson wound up winning that race and collecting \$343,861 in prize money. His team, Hendrick Motorsports, and sponsor, Lowe's Home Improvement, joined in the effort, as did track magnate Bruton Smith and fans from around the country.

NASCAR has an impressive fund-raising record, which is partly attributable to its close ties with corporate America but also because its top stars are among its top philanthropists.

Johnson, Jeff Gordon, **Tony Stewart**, Dale Earnhardt Jr. and Ryan Newman all have charitable foundations, and as the Johnson-led response to the California fires showed, NASCAR has a unique ability to mobilize resources quickly and efficiently.

Since 2004, a "NASCAR Day" celebration involving fans and corporations has raised more than \$4 million, topped by \$1.6 million this year. All proceeds go to the NASCAR Foundation, which supports children's causes and wildlife conservation but exists primarily to provide logistical help to drivers, teams and racetracks in their charitable work.

"We encourage them to get involved in the community, and if they choose to do that, we're here to help them bring it all together," said Sandy Marshall, executive director of the foundation. "It's a little easier to manage for us since we have a lot fewer athletes than, say, the NFL."

"And I think our athletes are unique. A lot of them come from humble backgrounds. They're passionate about it because they want to make an impact."

Certainly **Stewart** and Gordon have made significant impacts helping children suffering from life-threatening illnesses.

Stewart is among the major contributors to the Victory Junction Camp, founded by Kyle and Pattie Petty in honor of their late son, Adam, to give children a brief respite from their illnesses.

Stewart's top fundraiser is the Nextel Prelude to the Dream, for which he brings a number of fellow Nextel Cup drivers to Eldora Speedway, the dirt track he owns in Rossburg, Ohio. In its third year, the June event raised \$800,000, of which \$600,000 went to the Pettys to push Stewart's total contribution to the camp past \$3 million.

Gordon started his foundation in 1999 after watching the son of former crew chief Ray Evernham, Ray J, fight leukemia. He has given generously to the Riley Hospital for Children in Indianapolis and donated \$1 million toward construction of a 28-bed pediatric unit at a Concord, N.C., hospital that opened last December as the Jeff Gordon Children's Hospital.

"We get off-track sometimes and I have to say, 'Our goal is children.' You get involved in too many things and it starts to dilute your impact to accomplish the most good," Gordon said.

"Any person out there should do something some way to give back to their community. This is the way I've chosen to do it, and I'm very proud of that."

Earlier this month, Newman's foundation used a fishing tournament to raise over \$100,000 for conservation education and animal welfare.

