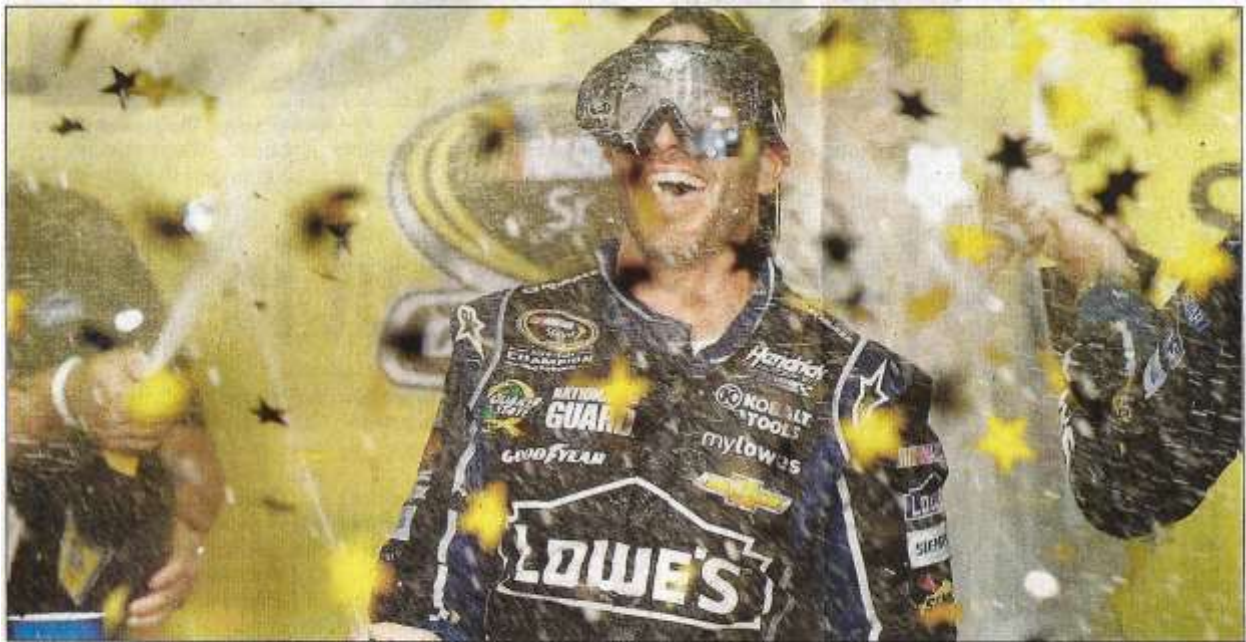


Johnson has earned respect of racing fans around The Villages

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By Steve Day



Terry Renna / The Associated Press
Jimmie Johnson celebrates after winning his sixth NASCAR Sprint Cup Series auto race title in eight years on Sunday. With the win, Johnson is making his case as one of the all-time greats in auto racing.

Love him or hate him, there's one thing Villages racing fans seem to agree on when it comes to Jimmie Johnson – you have to respect him.

Johnson wrapped up his sixth career NASCAR Sprint Cup championship in the past eight years Sunday at Homestead-Miami Speedway.

With the win, Johnson edged closer to a pair of legendary drivers that many fans consider to be the best ever to set foot in a car – Richard Petty and Dale Earnhardt, who each earned seven titles in their illustrious careers.

But does that mean Johnson now belongs in conversations about the greatest driver ever?

Silky Meegan, of the Village of Sabal Chase, thinks Johnson has accomplished enough to prove himself as one of the best.

"I think he has proven it, but unfortunately he doesn't have the vast popularity the others do," Meegan said. "People love to hate Jimmie Johnson, but the fact is – he wins."

Johnson won seven times this season, including the Daytona 500, the Coke Zero 400 – also held at Daytona International Speedway – and the Sprint Cup All-Star Race.

Some Villages fans said the current level of competition in the Sprint Cup Series makes those wins even more impressive.

"You are only as good as your competition and his competition is very good," said Jon Neville, of the Village of Buttonwood.

"There are a lot more cars with chances to win than when Richard Petty was racing, especially in Petty's middle years. I loved Dale Earnhardt, but he only had six or seven (competitors) who had a chance of winning."

Gary Civiletti, of the Village of Buttonwood, agreed that Johnson's status should be elevated given the talent level of his peers.

"No doubt about it, he's one of the best," Civiletti said. "He hasn't won as many as Petty and Earnhardt, but the competition is tougher than in the old days. There used to be only two or three guys who could win. Now there are 15."

One thing that Johnson's detractors point to is the spotty history of Johnson's crew chief, Chad Knaus, who has been involved in numerous rules disputes with NASCAR officials.

But fans said those allegations should not taint Johnson's success.

"The truth be known, every single driver and crew (cheat) a little," Meegan said.

"(Johnson's crew members) are a little higher profile and get caught more often. They are so good, everybody is looking for a way to discredit them."

Neville said that because other teams' transgressions have been forgiven over time, time should also heal Knaus' – and indirectly, Johnson's – reputation.

"The others have done things, but it was forgotten," Neville said. "Over time, it will be forgotten."

Civiletti said Knaus deserves a big slice of the credit for Johnson's success.

"That guy's a genius. Jimmie can drive, but (Knaus) leads the team," Civiletti said. "Nobody sweats over the details as much as that team."

And despite the history and the detractors, there's only one detail that matters for Johnson – the six championships.