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Steve Johnson, Pal 'Wally' Relentlessly Promote Biker's Brand

**By Susan Wade**

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On a commercial airline flight, the pilot usually commands the most attention – unless six-time NHRA Pro Stock Motorcycle winner Steve Johnson is on board.

The Birmingham-based racer flew home to Southern California to share Mothers' Day with his family in Grenada Hills, and he decided to give his first-class seat on the five-hour flight from Atlanta to a U.S. soldier. The flight attendant informed him that five were in the coach class and asked how she should determine who received the lucky upgrade. He was hoping other first-class passengers would join in the fun. But none budged, squandering the chance to be unselfish.

"I'm thinking of a number between 1 and 100," Johnson said, animated nevertheless by the opportunity to spread a little cheer. "Whoever picks the closest number gets the seat." (Because he's a racer, he favored the number "1.") He traded seats with an Air Force nurse who sat in first class for the first time in her life. She jotted him a note, saying his spontaneous act of kindness made her

day.

Actually, the joy she found made Johnson's day.



"There are so many people who do nice things for me. I'm blessed with good health. My bills are somewhat being paid. I have a little, tiny deal with one sponsor, so I'm grateful for that," he said. He said he'd be less comfortable for only five hours of his life.

"And they brought me snacks from first class, so I got the good snacks. But the hours of enjoyment and fulfillment and the chance to try to inspire other people...I couldn't have gotten any one of those three things if I would have just sat in that first-class seat. So there are so many things I get in repayment for doing this. It was a little thing, I felt."

That's so Steve Johnson, reaching out to others when it's no secret

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he could use a hand up or some unexpected endowment. In a racing career that has spanned four decades (1987 to the present), Johnson has pursued his passion with all the material luxuries of a monk. Still, he has raised money for the Red Cross, Racers Who Care, the NHRA's Youth and Educations Services (YES) program and other charitable projects, as well as encouraged students at technical colleges and served as drag racing's biggest cheerleader.

He does it all while he continues to buoy himself with inspirational messages and study communications, marketing, and entrepreneurial best practices in search of that right marketing fit for his unique brand. Despite competing without a well-heeled sponsor throughout most of his career, Johnson has developed a resilience, a joie de vivre that's part of his appeal and part of his motivation.

He does have at least eight people helping him ("Jock" Allen, Greg "Nugget" Bennett, Chris Dalton, Jeff Kile, Shane Gehrick, Jade Dalton, Jess Rawls, and Ron Andrei). However, Johnson said, "It sounds like we've got an army of help, but if you added up all of their salaries, well, they wouldn't total what a single well-trained motorcycle mechanic might make at a Suzuki store."

A fulltime gig in show business as a stand-up comedian seems more fitting — and probably more lucrative. But Johnson, 53, knows his brand, his "business DNA" and said, "When you race for 28 years [on a shoestring, people might] say, 'What a waste.' It's not a waste. It's just a journey."



Image: NHRA/National Dragster

On this twisting, detour-filled trip with him is a buddy: the Wally statue he won at the bike season opener in the March Gatornationals at Gainesville, Fla.

"I bring the Wally with me every single place I go: dirt-bike riding, golf, or on an airplane," Johnson said. It's among his unofficial duties as self-appointed "court jester" of drag racing.

"John Force, he's our Elvis Presley, our Dale Earnhardt," Johnson said of the Funny Car legend. "I'm going to be the second in charge if anything happens to John. I'm going to be the court jester, the second guy on the team that helps promote our sport in any way possible."

His victory at Gainesville was his first since Sept. 14, 2008, breaking an 87-race winless streak. That makes "Wally" the latest prop for Johnson. "Now that we finally won a race after 80 tries," Johnson said, "I've got a new tool. I'm using it as an American Express card: Don't leave home without it!"

He wants it to get maximum exposure. So he took it to the recent NASCAR races at Talladega, Ala., where he placed it briefly on the pit wall and drew some attention.



Image: NHRA/National Dragster

"It's like when I put the No. 1 [sign] on my trailer going to Charlotte [in April]. I worked really, really hard for what I got. I think people's lives need to be rewarded," Johnson said. "If you're out in the garden and you plant, your reward is the plant or the fruit or the vegetable. I'm planting this garden that's trying to win a championship. So when up comes a win at Gainesville, I'm going to pick the fruit and I'm going to show it to everybody on the planet! Your soul needs to understand [to] rejoice so that it remembers the hard work and the payoff. Otherwise, if somebody just worked and worked and worked and never got a thank-you or never got a paycheck, it would be hard to keep doing it over and over and over, unless they really loved it.

"I'm going to be the second in charge if anything happens to John [Force]. I'm going to be the court jester, the second guy on the team

"So my deal is I'm giving my soul a little love for all the hard work, and it's like, 'Hey – I'm going to party,' " he said. "Every single race, from now until the end of the year, I'm having a party at the races. It builds excitement for the sport, and it has new people buying tickets to come and see our sport, and it helps my soul because we're celebrating the Gainesville victory."

He said sometimes NHRA drag racers "think we're second

that helps promote our sport in any way possible. 

fiddle to NASCAR, and we know where we are. But it's our job to jump on the John Force bandwagon and promote the hell out of our sport."

It does pay off, as Johnson learned at Talladega – and he learned that the NHRA isn't pooh-poohed in NASCAR circles (where he happens to have many friends, from boss Mike Helton to team mechanics). Motor Racing Network pit reporter Alex Hayden was impressed that Johnson let him hold "Wally." Hayden called the trophy "sacred" and reverently declined to hold it, but Johnson insisted that Hayden "feel some of the love." Hayden e-mailed Johnson a thank-you note following the race.

"That's the reward in life," Johnson said. "I've got to have money to run my racing team, and I'm going to find a big sponsor. But there just has to be more to life."

His mother has asked him,
"Are you smelling the roses
when you go to each of these
cities?" And, Johnson said,
"I'm like . . . 'No.' So I've
recalculated.

"Smelling the roses, for me, is
about sharing the experience,"
he said. "At some point, it just
has to be more than just
money."

Yet money is precisely what
fuels the effort. Figuring out the perfect method to unlock those sponsorship dollars is the
ultimate mystery.

"I cannot figure out Corporate America," Johnson said. "I swear, we have one of the
strongest programs in all of motorsports. We're not only engaged with fans and all the
retailers, but we're also engaged with the 17-24-year-old demographic that's always
looking to buy cars, always looking to buy food, always looking to buy disposable [goods].
And they have disposable income. Kids in school have up to \$80 disposable income a
week now.

"We're in all those tech schools every week. We're in front of 50,000 students. So when
we have a chance to influence those students about their buying habits, that becomes a
marketing idea. And maybe Corporate America can get involved," he said. "I think our
whole sport has that to offer, but we're doing it right now. If I do that more now with
winning, that is going to [build awareness of the NHRA]."



Johnson still dreams big, and if karma counts for anything and years upon years of investment in doing the right thing really does pay off, he will have all he wants someday.

He vows that he can wow billionaire Warren Buffett.

"It's because of my brand," Johnson said. "I promote my brand. I'm going to stick out because I have that trophy with me. And he's going to be like, 'Who's the guy with the trophy?' Instantly it says, 'That guy's a winner.' Society says they want to hang out with winners, so instantly I'm going to stick out.

"The second I get a chance to meet Warren Buffett, I'm going to have a sponsor," Johnson said with conviction. "Until then, I'm going to work on promoting our sport."