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## About the cover

Drive a little and enjoy a lot this long holiday season. Groups in the lake area and within an easy drive offer a wealth of symphony concerts, choral productions, opera, ballet, plays and dinner theater. Story, page 58. Photo/ Richard Rudisill.

Look for our next issue on Nov. 23.

# Commercial success

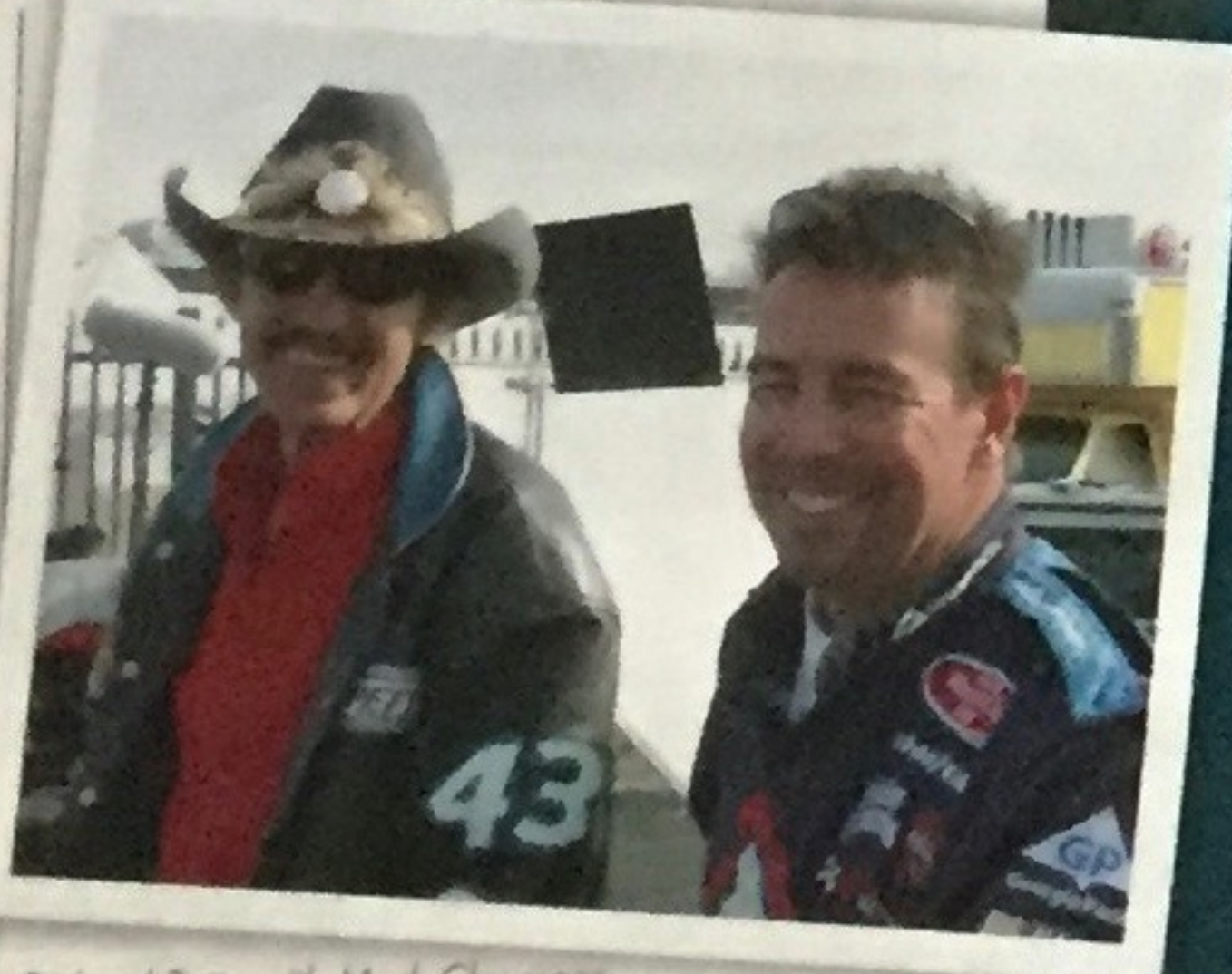
STUNT DRIVER EXCELS BEHIND THE WHEEL

By Mike Savicki | Photos by Richard Rudisill

The television cameras were ready to roll on a country road east of Concord. In true "Dukes of Hazard" style, two rebels – in this case Richard and Kyle Petty – were set to run from the law at high speeds in their Nextel Cup car down a narrow, treacherous and twisting dirt road. But instead of Kyle Petty sitting behind the wheel, it was Mark Claussner who cranked the ignition, brought the car to life and accelerated toward the horizon. For this Cornelius-based actor, stunt driver and precision driver, doubling for a NASCAR legend and executing stunts that most drivers would label impossible is just a routine day at the office.

"There were three things that made that shoot interesting," Claussner says as he reflects on his most memorable commercial adventure. "When you combine a racing car with water, a dirt road and high speed, things tend to get interesting. I remember sitting in the car waiting for the director's cue and noticing that they were wetting down the road with water. On certain sets, they don't tell you a lot about what the final product will be, and I wasn't ready for the water. Seeing the truck spraying down the dirt and knowing I would be driving through mud along a hundred foot drop-off certainly got my attention."

With both Petties watching, Claussner executed the stunt to perfection three times before the film crew stopped rolling. "The director wound up using the footage from the first take because, in the second and third takes, as I began to realize what I was doing and how close we were to literally sliding off the road, I think you



Richard Petty with Mark Claussner

could see that I was driving a bit more cautiously," he says. The footage appeared in a national commercial for Brawny paper towels.

■ Continued on page 29



Claussner's list of clients reads like a who's who of national television advertisers. In 1998, he first worked with Ogilvy & Mather on a project for Krystal. He has since worked with such clients as Ford, Chrysler, General Motors, Coca-Cola, Carquest, Visa, Lowe's and Wendy's. And, in addition to sitting in for Kyle Petty, Claussner has doubled for Terry Labonte, Mike Skinner, Ryan Newman, Tony Stewart, Jimmie Johnson, Dale Earnhardt Jr., Kevin Harvick and Rusty Wallace. When he's not behind the wheel, Claussner even does a bit of driver training and has taught future stars how to drive a Nextel Cup-style car on the NBC reality show "Next Action Star."

### Change in focus

After moving to North Carolina from Chicago in 1996 to try to break into the big leagues of racing and achieving only marginal success behind the wheel, his professional focus changed with a simple phone call. "One day in the late 1990s, out of nowhere, I picked up the phone, and it was a talent agency for drivers. They asked if I would be willing to drive a street car fast at Darlington and wanted me there quickly to do it. To make a long story short, we wound up shooting three commercials

that day, I was able to get my Screen Actors Guild card, and the doors opened for a new career."

His resume isn't entirely full of cameras, glitz and celebrity. In 2001, Claussner was selected to be one of five professional drivers challenged with keeping the Olympic Torch lit and moving it along the 65-day journey from Atlanta to Salt Lake City before the 2002 Winter Olympic Games. According to Claussner, organizers selected the team to pilot the one-of-a-kind Chevy Avalanche Torch Truck, in part because of the perceived threats that lingered after the events of Sept. 11, 2001.

"With the flame burning at 2,000 degrees in a cauldron near a tank of propane in the rear of the truck, some people believed we were a rolling target," he says. "But for me, as a professional driver, it was one of the highlights of my career. To see the emotions of the people we passed and the energy of the people who waved at us from the overpasses and knowing what the flame meant to America ... it was incredible."

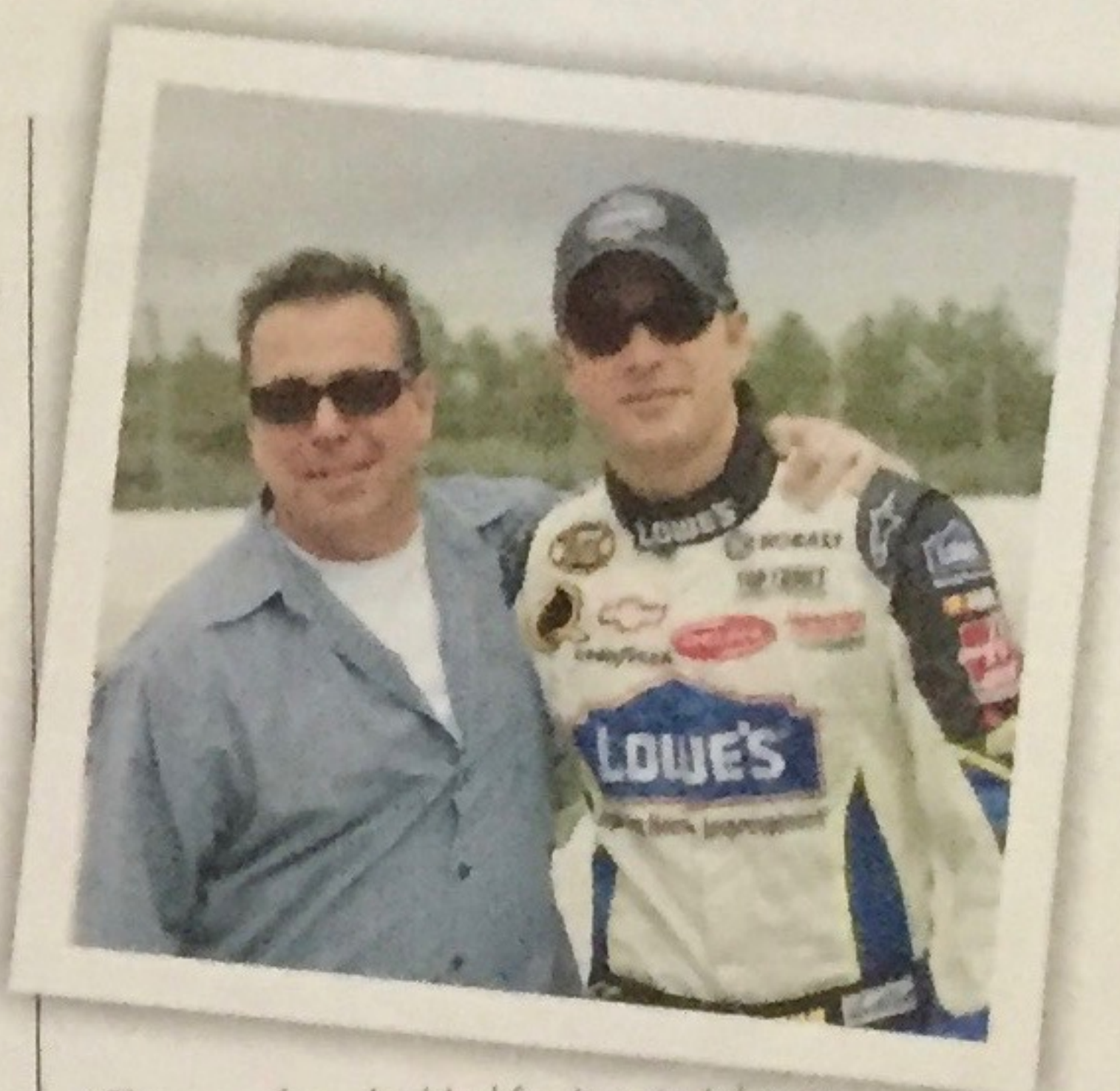
Most recently, Claussner traveled to South America to demonstrate a new model BMW built with a computer system that analyzes the car and driver and helps improve the turning and performance beyond what the driver alone can do. The system is called a

Dynamic Stability Control System, and the demonstrations were cutting edge. "There are things we did in the demonstrations that I as a professional driver never do. These car manufacturers really push the envelope as they try to make their cars more responsive, innovative and safer," he says.

### Adapting to the business

Looking at the numbers, one might say Claussner has a knack for the job. He has pushed an ARCA car to 200 mph and raced a snowmobile through a 200-mile cross-country race in just over three hours "including the three times I was thrown off along the course," he says. He has piloted the prerun and chase bikes in the Baja 1000 and has appeared in more than 70 television spots.

Experience has given him a different outlook on the stunt business. "I think what sets me apart is the fact that I have learned to speak the language of the producers and directors, and know how to deliver what they want for television safely and effectively. While the NASCAR drivers operate under such incredibly intense schedules and may only be available for very brief appearances on a set, I am able to spend time with the production team to make the most of the stunts and get them right."



Claussner has doubled for Jimmie Johnson.

After a decade in the business, Claussner has no plans to retire. "My wife, Jennifer, is very supportive, and I am now able to be more selective in choosing my projects. I'd like to keep going until the work is no longer fun for me," he says. "But one of the difficulties I now face is spending time away from our daughter (Sabina) when I have to fly to projects. That's harder than most of my driving."

Sabrina is 2 1/2 now.

Claussner concludes, "You know, I thought I'd be living the dream of being a race car driver and now, 10 years later, I'm living a different dream." **LN**

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