

[Fast-track career]

A 'circular' career path

This charged-up Duke takes life one circuit at a time

BY KATIE HUDSON ('10)

While most college students spend their weekends relaxing or studying, Jenna Wagner ('10) pushes herself as fast as she can — literally. Wagner has raced cars professionally for five years. Her passion for motorsports sparked after watching her dad and uncle race. The weekend warrior's passion was certainly nurtured by her family's hometown — Bristol, Va. — with NASCAR short track Bristol Motor Speedway in its backyard.

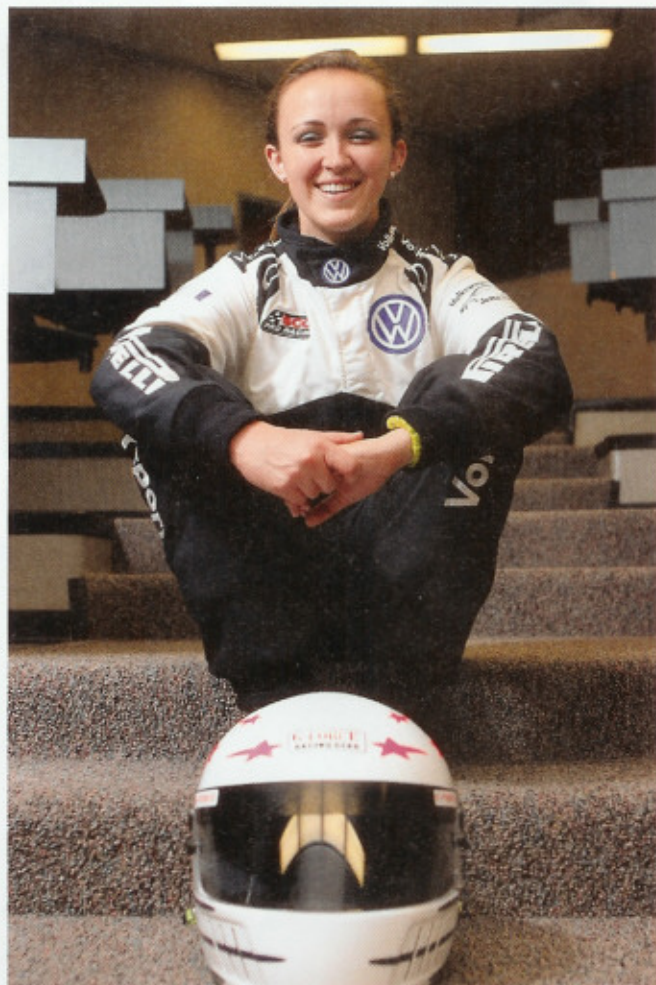
Wagner's father built her first racecar by the time she was 16. At the beginning of her senior year at JMU, she already had more than 40 races under her belt.

"Racing is definitely a family thing," says Wagner. "My family loves to watch me race. My dad takes on the public relations role for my race team, and he's my mechanic and spotter every Saturday. It's nice to have a father and a fan!"

Wagner first competed in a beginners' series — the Lonesome Pine Racing 101 program — in 2005. She began her pro career strapping in for races in the Charger Division — driving a 4-cylinder Pon-

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NASCAR hopeful Jenna Wagner ('10) currently has more than 60 professional races under her belt. She has taken Rookie of the Year honors in two regional racing series and won a coveted spot on the 2010 U.S. team to compete in the Volkswagen Jetta TDI Cup series.

tiac. "I've raced all different types of cars since I started," says Wagner, who is often the only female at any given race-track. "Respect is a common quality among my opponents," she says, "no matter the gender. It's nice to beat the boys, though, especially when you're the only female at the track."

While racing in the MOD-4 Division in 2007 and 2008, Wagner drove Thunderbirds. She's proven her love and mastery of the Charger and MOD-4 divisions by winning the Rookie of the Year title in both series. She took rookie honors in 2008 in the MOD-4 Division and ended up sixth in the point standings. In 2009, she moved into the Charger Division, which features heavier cars with

more powerful engines. She again took rookie honors and ranked third in points. "It's always nice to be honored for hard work," she says.

Hard work also plays a role off the track. It's often up to Wagner to find sponsors for her racecars. "It's all about making contacts," she explains. "I've found so many JMU alums who are willing to support my team." Wagner's JMU friends and classmates often make trips to the track to cheer her on.

During her senior year, Wagner traveled to Las Vegas to try out for the SCCA Pro Racing Volkswagen Jetta TDI Cup. She nabbed a coveted spot to compete in 2010 and spent the summer after graduation competing in races all over the United

States and Mexico. One of her first races in this fairly new division fell on the same day as JMU's 2010 May Commencement. After walking across the stage and tossing her graduation cap in the air, Wagner raced to New Jersey in time for the start of the race. "Racing is kind of a way of life," she laughs and admits she does have one "off track" speeding ticket.

In her first season in the Volkswagen Jetta TDI Cup, which launched in 2008, Wagner finished 24th in points. The series features cars with turbo-charged direct-injection engines. The series was launched as a way to introduce clean diesel technology to the U.S. motorsports market and to develop up-and-coming talent. Drivers between the ages of 16 and 26 compete on road courses around North America in identical factory-prepared clean diesel powered Jetta TDIs. Fans can follow the action at www.vwmotorsportusa.com.

Wagner also competed in the 2010 Charger Division. Her fans can follow her on a website she designed, www.jennawagner.com/. The site features her racing biography, photos and weekly team updates from both racing series.

As an undergraduate, Wagner never let her academics take a backseat. She double majored in media arts and design with a concentration in converged media; and in writing, rhetoric and technical communication with a concentration in online publications. She minored in computer information systems. She also completed internships with the JMU Office of Athletics Photography Services and Immerge Technologies in downtown Harrisonburg. Her future career dreams include freelance Web design and, of course, competing in NASCAR. But, for now, she's taking it "one circuit at a time." ■

* Learn more about Jenna Wagner ('10) at www.jennawagner.com.