

By Alyssa Roenigk
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The biggest threat to [Scott Dixon](#)'s career weighs less than two pounds, but it's growing.



That's right, safety first.

Early in April's Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach, four members of Dixon's IndyCar team are standing motionless in his pit box, their eyes fixated on a bank of computer screens that monitor different threats on the racecourse. One screen displays the current positions of Dixon (his name highlighted in yellow) and his new teammate at Target Chip Ganassi Racing, [Dario Franchitti](#) (in blue). Another shows a procession of numbered dots, each representing a car in the 23-driver field. Dixon, No. 9, is currently in sixth place (he'll eventually finish 15th). The remaining screens track the car's speed, oil, fuel, tire pressure and lap times.

Behind the Story

- [Writer Alyssa Roenigk talks about the difficult question of asking racers to weigh their careers versus their children.](#) 

But beyond the monitors, toward the back of Pit Row, hiding beneath the soft cotton of a brightly striped sundress, rests the true barometer of what lies ahead for Dixon. And in mid-July, during the heart of IndyCar season, that little speed bump will come at him, kicking and screaming, with the potential to derail the best driver in the league: its daddy.

In racing circles, conventional wisdom says kids slow drivers down -- by getting into their heads, making mush of their hearts and softening their judgment. Sleep-deprived and more scattered in focus, drivers are less likely to ride the edge. They may not realize it, but drivers with young children race more conservatively, going lighter on the gas. Or so the theory goes.

"Having a family forces you into a state of maturity," says racing psychology expert Patrick Cohn. "And with maturity, drivers become more calculated with the risks they are willing to take to win." The longer they wait to have children and the more experienced they are as drivers -- Dixon, who's 28, is in his 16th year of professional racing -- the greater the effect.

"Responsibility, combined with experience, may slow down the most aerobatic fighter pilots or the most aggressive race car drivers," says Colonel Thomas A. Kolditz, chairman of West Point's

Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership. "We become more aware of the consequences of our actions. Being a father has affected my own willingness to accept risk."

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No wonder team owner Chip Ganassi was, shall we say, less than enthusiastic when Dixon and wife Emma announced they were expecting their first child right around the same time as the July 12 Streets of Toronto race. "I've seen having kids slow down more guys than I've seen it speed them up," Ganassi says. "The guys at the top, the great drivers, seem to slow down."

In 2007, Ganassi witnessed how even a small miscalculation, let alone a life-altering change, can turn a season. Although Dixon won four races that year, becoming just the third IndyCar driver to take three checkered flags in a row, he lost the series championship in gut-wrenching fashion. In the lead halfway through the final lap of the final race of the season, at Chicagoland, Dixon ran out of fuel, allowing Franchitti to grab the win and the title. The Legend of Turn 3 became a major motivation. "The guys were angry and had the winter to fester," Dixon says. "In 2008, we came out of the box aggressive." He won the opening race at Homestead and then five more, for a record-tying six victories in a season, including his first at Indy (from the pole) to secure his second championship. "I got married in February, won the 500 in May and the championship in September," he says. "Last year was fantastic. I don't know how to better it."

And therein lies his challenge this year. Even without the midseason distraction of a newborn baby, Dixon's team will face its toughest test yet: repeating last year's fairy-tale performance. "The energy Scott had on that final day in 2007, everybody plugged into that," Ganassi says. "We're trying to do the same by bringing Dario in to challenge and push him." For his part, Dixon has proved he performs at his best when the pressure is on, and this year that target on the back of his fire suit is more than a team logo. He aims to become the second driver in modern history to win back-to-back series titles ([Sam Hornish Jr.](#) was the first) and the sixth to repeat at Indy. He'll have to do it against the most competitive field in recent memory -- and once July rolls around, that other new teammate will require his attention. "Nothing has changed," says Dixon, currently ranked No. 4 with one win in three starts. "We have the same goals as last year: win Indy and win the championship."

Cohn has heard this before. "Drivers experience the gladiator effect," he says. "It's the belief that things always happen to the other person. 'I am invincible. Nothing will happen to me. I won't get hurt. Kids won't slow me down.' Denial is a survival technique."



Come July, Scott and Emma Dixon will have another mouth to feed besides their pups, Arthur and George.

We assumed as much. So *The Mag* ran some numbers in NASCAR, which, with twice as many races as IndyCar, has a larger data field to mine when it comes to gauging the effects of first-born children on racers. After [Jeff Gordon](#)'s daughter, Ella Sofia, was born in June 2007, the four-time Sprint Cup champ won less frequently (six wins in 40 pre-Ella races vs. two wins in 40 post-Ella tries) and also had fewer top fives and top 10s. But Gordon's average finish actually improved by nearly a point, from 11.93 to 11.00. The same was true when we studied the only other current Top 25 drivers who became fathers while running full time in Cup. Despite going winless, both [Casey Mears](#) and [Jeff Burton](#) had better average finishes in the 40 races after their first children arrived. Meanwhile, IndyCar's [Tony Kanaan](#) has won less often since the birth of his son, Leonardo, in September 2007 (six wins in 25 pre-Leo races vs. one in 21 post-Leo), but consistency has him leading the points race heading into the Indy 500.

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Of course, there are many counterpoints to this theory. And they all come from the drivers we mentioned in that previous paragraph.

Jeff Gordon: *"It hasn't changed how I drive or how I approach racing, but it's changed my schedule. I'm more intense about racing than ever. It's just that my time isn't spent on racing as much as it was 10 years ago."*

Casey Mears: *"Being a parent motivates you to be more successful, to work harder. You want your kids to see you win."*

Jeff Burton: *"If I drive into Turn 3 at Rockingham thinking about my children, perhaps I need to be somewhere else."*

Yes, the research is anecdotal and doesn't account for variables like injuries, team changes, team drama and teammate swaps. But if there is anyone too close to the situation to recognize the kid effect, it's the man behind the wheel. "Race car drivers live in denial about a lot of things," says three-time Winston Cup champ [Darrell Waltrip](#), who won his last race at age 45, in 1992, 12 days after his second daughter, Sarah, was born. "But in their quiet time, when they're alone and have a moment to think, they admit to themselves that they are affected by that new little person in their life. They might not admit it to a reporter or their teammates, but they know. I told Jeff Gordon, before he became a dad, the birth of his child would affect him. You worry more. Suddenly, there are times you get in the car and think, I don't want my little girl to grow up without a daddy. You can deny that all day, but it's the truth."

So, back to those arguments ...

Tony Kanaan: "Kids do not slow you down. My son made me faster. He made me a happier man, and you are faster when you are happy. Plus, I have to work harder to buy the diapers."

[Dan Wheldon](#): "In the race car, I'm not thinking about my wife and son. I'm thinking about making the race car fast."

Scott Dixon: "People say getting married slows you down. But that sped me up. You have to pay for the wedding. Now we'll have someone else in the family to pay for. I'll have to drive faster."

There's no denying that. Fortunately, Dixon will have a generous support circle to get him up to speed as a new dad. Target showers him with gift cards, and a few days before Scott and Emma left for Long Beach, they received a surprise delivery: Oakley, Scott's eyewear sponsor, shipped 3,000 diapers to the couple's Indianapolis home. "Right to our doorstep," Dixon says. "They nearly blocked the entry, and they take up a whole wall in the house. I guess we're prepared."

At least for the first of what will be many, many changes.

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Dixon can look to his racing peers like Tony Kanaan (above) as examples of new fathers who may have slowed on the track but still climbed the standings.