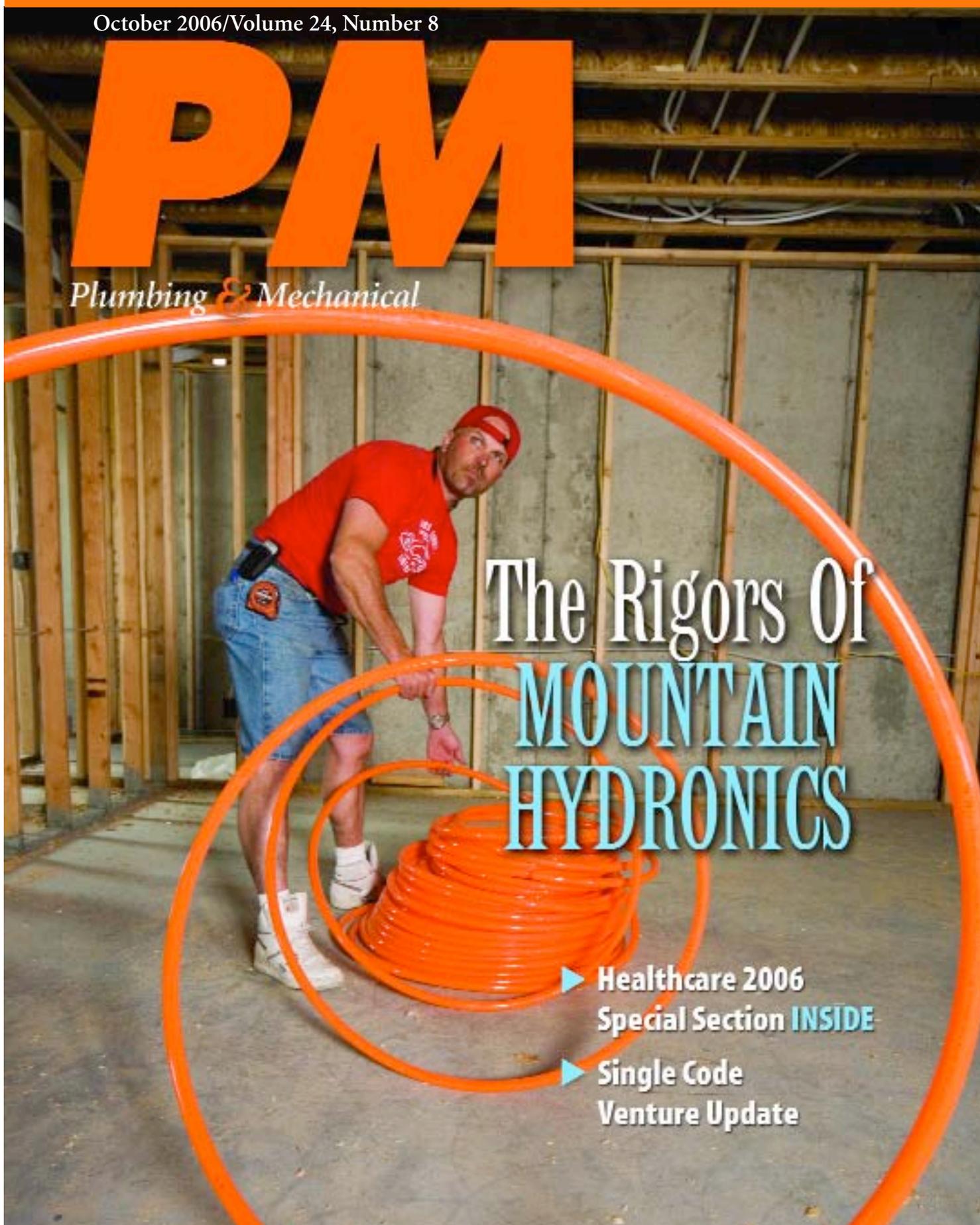


October 2006/Volume 24, Number 8

PM

Plumbing & Mechanical



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Todd Hamilton gets to work on another Sprinter job. [Inset] Justin Johnson checks to the pressure on radiant lines prior to a concrete pour.





The Rigors Of Mountain Hydronics

Justin Johnson put 62,000 miles on his pickup last year driving from one top-notch radiant installation to another.

by Steve Smith

Few and far between only half applies to **Justin Johnson** — and that half still doesn't do his working conditions justice. Change that phrase to “a lot and very, very far between,” and you'll get a better sense of how the 31-year-old owner of Sprinter Heating & Hydronics, Idaho Falls, Idaho, spends his working days.

With a customer territory of about 40,000 square miles, and an imposing mountain range that slices diagonally through it, roads aren't exactly arranged in a grid. As a result, the miles add up quickly in this part of the country. A straight line from point A to B might be only 50 miles on a map, but actually driving there can easily add 200 miles or more to the odometer. Johnson put 62,000 miles on his Dodge diesel pickup last year while moving between jobsites maneuvering through the Teton Mountain region.

But for a young Wet Head like Johnson (he started his business only

Photos courtesy of Watts Radiant



Mountain Hydronics



Todd Hamilton and Justin Johnson complete a staple-up installation.

five years ago), with top-drawer skills in radiant and snowmelt, a passion for the craft, and a solid work ethic, there is plenty of work to do. With an energy level not attributed to coffee or hi-octane energy drinks, Johnson keeps things moving at a steady, deliberate pace 12 to 16 hours a day.

"We try not to make a habit of the long hours, but here in the mountains we've got to move while the getting's good," Johnson explains. Pros in the business of high country hydronics

quickly learn to do most of their work within the brief, warm weather cycle that sneaks in slowly in May, and slams on the brakes by late-September.

"We call it the 'pipe-down' season," Johnson adds. "We have just three or four months to pipe outdoor slabs, foundations and snowmelt systems. That's it. The snow and subzero temperatures can make getting to and from jobsites a real challenge the rest of the year, but we manage. Generally, we get as much pipe in the ground as

possible during the summer months, and return to those sites to do boiler installs and staple-up applications during the cold season."

World-Class Market: One facet of the job helps. Actually, it's the marketplace. New home construction and real estate demographics throughout the Teton Mountain range show that most of what's happening in Johnson's big backyard is funded by some of the world's wealthiest people.

Last year, Sotheby's Real Estate in Jackson Hole, Wyo., won recognition as the most successful Sotheby's location, worldwide. In 2005, they sold \$1.3 billion in real estate, and did so with a small population. Some of the properties sold at well over \$100 million. And the average price of a home in Jackson is just over \$1 million today. High-end home construction has become a way of life for the majority of those in the building industry there today.

As a result, a typical job for the Sprinter crew makes the long drive more than worthwhile. The average mountain home is between 4,000 and 6,000 sq. ft.

"We've done many, as well, in the 10,000- to 15,000- sq.-ft. range, and a few well over that," Johnson adds.

But there are some differences in Johnson's territory. Most of these high-end homes are built within a radius of 25 miles around Jackson Hole.

Outside that area, there are still plenty of big homes built in Johnson's hometown of Rigby, Idaho, and nearby Idaho Falls. Here, the homes are a bit more modest. In that area, he often does work in 3,000- to 5,000-sq.-ft. homes with prices in the \$400,000 to \$700,000 range. "As I expand the company, we'll likely do more of the super-high-end work."

Quality Goes In: Though Johnson insists there's nothing truly unique about his work, he adds that there are two key attributes to the systems they install.

"The first is what we demand of ourselves," he says. "That is, to give the customer the best work that we're capable of. As a result, our systems work; they do exactly what we say they'll do with no compromises.

Mountain Hydronics



Secondly, we also make them look really good. Kind of like an art form. After all, the homeowner should also have some pride in the work.”

Part of Sprinter’s quality equation is the products it uses and relies on routinely, such as Monitor and Buderus boilers; tekmar controls; Grundfos circulators; and Watts Radiant PEX and Onix tubing.

Johnson outlined for us what a typical couple of days’ worth of work looks like immersed in the rigors of mountain hydronics. One day, they moved between a radiant rough-in job in Jackson, then traveled a mountainous 120 miles south of Afton, Wyo., where they handled a radiant heat installation, and supervised a concrete over-pour for several small, private residence airplane hangars. That became eight hours of actual work, and five hours of travel time. The next day — much nearer to their homes in Idaho — they spent nine hours on the job, and 60 minutes in transit.

“The shorter days are rarities,” Johnson says. “But they happen from time to time, giving each of us a bit more time to spend with the family, even in the midst of our busy season.”

Johnson’s experience with radiant heat began while working for a high-end homebuilder about 10 years ago. He was hired to oversee all gypsum concrete floor underlayments, a responsibility that sent him to Hacker Industries for certification training. He held the position for three years, learning more about radiant heat all the while. After a brief stint with a hydronics contracting firm, he struck out on his own

“It was one of the best decisions I’ve ever made,” Johnson says. His aspirations today have few limitations. He’s also made many good connections with builders, wholesalers and reps, and knows the business, the technology and the market. “I cancelled all of my expensive Yellow Pages ads three years ago.”

His business is growing quickly. “When I began Sprinter, I wanted to have just one or two jobs a month to stay afloat,” he says. “Today, if we don’t complete one or two jobs a week, we’re



Justin Johnson (in the background) supervises a pour at a private airplane hangar.

concerned. We’re now booked up for the next five months. At times, it falls back to just a two- or three-month lead time, but it always seems to bump back up there as more work comes in.”

Sprinter is almost entirely focused on the construction industry for new installations, with 90 percent of that in residential business, and 10 percent commercial. Almost all of its new installations involve radiant or snowmelt. Johnson is also beginning to branch out into hydronic service work. The company, for example, handles all the service work for Town Square, a commercial property owner in Jackson. The real estate developer owns or operates many of the town’s hotels, apartment buildings, restaurants and retail stores. In all, Town Square has more than 60 boilers and hydronic systems that Sprinter maintains regularly.

Crystal Ball: According to Johnson, market demand for alternative energy sources and high-efficiency equipment is hot, hot, hot. “More than one-half of the homes we do this year will get some form of high-efficiency equipment, with added attention to insulation and heat distribution.”

Though Sprinter does not do forced-air work, Johnson is now beginning to explore radiant cooling for homes. He also expects that exploration to take him into solar and geothermal technology, with the expectation that he will couple this

technology with radiant heat and snowmelt applications.

A new industry trends he sees that will make an impact are sophisticated controls with online capabilities for remote system monitoring, diagnostics and control.

“We’re just moving into some of this technology now and find that it opens up a whole new realm for higher-end hydronics,” he says.

As a relatively new member of the Radiant Panel Association, Johnson has found a wealth of information about new installation techniques and technology. “Their certification program is one we’ll no doubt want to participate in.”

Johnson is confident that Sprinter will continue to grow. “We’re now on the edge of a very exciting opportunity,” he says. “The company and our reputation as a quality contracting firm are fairly well-established.”

Of course, those attributes need to be maintained at all costs. “As I look ahead,” he explains, “I feel we’ll soon be ready to take it to a whole new level by expanding the firm. The first five years have been really good, but the next five will be much different because of the growth that I expect to see. I think it’s realistic to expect that Sprinter will have 25 to 50 employees in five years, and that we will serve a much broader market as well. But the focus will remain much the same with hydronics and radiant at the core.” **PM**