



Head Winds

Fans of “America’s Weatherman” know that **Jim Cantore** started his career at The Weather Channel with a **full head of hair**. “I’ve been hit in the head with so much wind, sand, leaves, and stuff that you might wonder if all that dermabrasion took a bit too much off,” he says, laughing. But Cantore doesn’t lament his loss of locks. “Thank God **bald is beautiful** now, I mean *really* beautiful. It was a little tough, though, when MSN did this article about the best-known bald men and I wasn’t included.”

Whither Cantore?

It’s every way the wind blows for Jim Cantore, The Weather Channel’s consummate snow fanatic. As he forecasts and informs, this action hero of the weather almost seems to channel the planet. / By Arnie Cooper / Illustration by Wes Duval

SINCE HIS DEBUT ON THE WEATHER CHANNEL in the summer of 1986, Jim Cantore’s exaggerated and excited hand movements and intense dark eyes have enthusiastically conveyed his passion for one of the few things that affects everyone. As with many weather aficionados (*fanatics* is perhaps a better term), Cantore’s fixation can be traced to his childhood fascination with those hexagonal crystals of frozen water vapor, AKA snow.

“Once, this weather guy in Boston, Bruce Schwoegler, called for 3 to 4 feet of snow in New England, and I said, ‘Oh, my God!’ You can’t even imagine that visual in my brain. I was up all night waiting for those first flakes. It was my addiction to snow that fired the whole thing up for me,” Cantore says.

A native of White River Junction, Vermont, Cantore certainly saw his share of the white stuff growing up. But besides being awed by snowstorms and other weather phenomena, he says it was his father who ultimately encouraged his entry into meteorology. “He was like, ‘Jim, you need to go study the weather; you’re addicted.’”

After getting a B.S. in meteorology from Vermont’s Lyndon State College and interning at Channel 7 in Boston, Cantore got a call and made a fast, almost fated leap from local news to the fledgling national cable network The Weather Channel. “The rest is history,” he says nostalgically.

Now, 21 years later, the 44-year-old storm chaser is as passionate about isobars and cut-off lows as ever. Whether up to his knees in a snowdrift in Central Park, ankle deep in sand on the Florida coast, or safely out of the elements in The Weather Channel studios, this self-proclaimed weather geek never disappoints viewers. HEMISPHERES caught up with Cantore last fall during his brief return to Atlanta in between covering the California wildfires and Hurricane Noel.

Q: Everyone knows that good weather forecasting can save lives, but The Weather Channel has been the butt of jokes by comedians. Why do you think TWC is something people like to mock?

A: In part, it was because The Weather Channel was noncontroversial, but in the ’80s, the attitude was,

“When I’m out there, it’s a little bit like a performance, but I feel that, with everybody listening to me, it’s important to really tell them something.”

“Who would tune in to watch weather for 24 hours?” Then a significant thing happened: Everyone who loved weather came out of the closet. It was on commercials. There were

movies like *Twister* and *The Perfect Storm*. And you know what? People started realizing that weather is kind of cool—and we’ve always gone into depth explaining it. I get tons of letters from people who say things like “Y’know, Jim, it’s great watching you do this thing called weather. Thanks for showing me the ropes, showing me the path I should’ve chosen when I was a kid.”

Q: What’s your take on the ubiquitous “weatherperson as sacrificial meat to the weather gods,” standing there grimacing into a gale or a blizzard and showing viewers just how bad it is? Or sticking the ruler in the snow?

A: The Weather Channel is known for its gobs of research, but what we found in the early years was that people were thinking, “Thanks for the 400,000 maps per week, but show me what you’re so passionate about.” So we started going out and doing weather. We were definitely the pioneers of all this, even though, quite frankly, Dan Rather did cover Hurricane Camille in 1969, so I have to give him that.

Q: Do you think meteorologists will still be doing this a century from now?

A: Well, they’ll probably be doing it from safer quarters. I think we’re approaching an age when we’ll be able to put cameras everywhere and film everything in real time without needing even a satellite truck and having people in harm’s way. That, to me, is going to be the ticket, meaning you can voice-over from inside, where we do before-and-after pictures. CNN is already doing it, and they certainly, to me, are on the cutting edge of everything. They’re just doing so much stuff. Even with the California fires [last fall], they had a gazillion people out there, some of whom went to cover the weather angle.

Q: Speaking of dangerous situations, can you tell me about one or two that stand out in your mind?

A: They’re all dangerous. I mean, especially hurricanes, but we’re not deliberately trying to put ourselves in danger. There are always times when we ask, “When do I need to get out of this?” And the weather dictates that. I’ll tell you right now: I’ve never stood in a 100-mile-an-hour wind. There’s only so much

protection you can get from a big satellite truck. That’s why I’m saying that the days are coming when you can get this small satellite dish and hide it in the corner and protect it and lock it down with a camera behind it. But there is a thrill for people to be able to see the intensity. Sometimes, it’s not enough to look out a window. But if you see someone getting hammered—they’re sideways because they can’t stand up—well, that puts things into perspective.

Q: Part of your appeal on TWC is that when the cameras throw to you, you really unwind with a dramatic, gesticulating presentation about what’s happening. Are you channeling the planet, or is that just meteorological enthusiasm?

A: Dude, I just think this stems from this long love of weather. I love to teach. Maybe it’s insecurity. Who knows? I’ve always gotten a thrill out of being able to explain something to somebody. When I’m out there, it’s a little bit like a performance, but I feel that, with everybody listening to me, it’s important to really tell them something.

Q: As someone who’s obviously fanatical about the weather, is there ever a time when it isn’t at least in the back of your mind? Can you ever really escape it?

A: No, I can’t. If there’s a night where I’m predicting rain for Chicago or snow for DC, the first thing I do the next morning is get up and look at that. I have to see if it worked out because I totally want to be right. And if I wasn’t, I ask for a second to explain why this didn’t happen. It’s almost like having an addiction to gambling. I’m betting on whether what I’m predicting is going to be right or wrong. It’s my own little mind game. Part of me feels like if I’m right often enough, then I’ve got a kind of bragging right.


Q: Has your forecast accuracy improved since you began?

A: It’s as good now at 48 hours as it was at 24 when I first started. And the five-day forecast is as good as the three-day once was.

Q: And what’s on the horizon?

A: Faster computers mean more data and smaller grids. I’m trying to explain this without being confusing. If you just put the whole state of Colorado on one grid, then something’s gonna be really ►




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bad about that forecast because you're not taking into account the topography and the fact that you go from 5,000 up to 12,000 feet and down again. If we break Colorado into 20 grids, you'd have a much better forecast. Meso-modeling, smaller-scale modeling, is the way of the future. And then to be able to take a region and put it into a country ... *wow!*

Q: Does this constantly improving technology reduce the need for human interpretation and analysis in forecasting?

A: No. There's always going to be a go-to guy or girl. Somebody's always gotta take the fall. Until the models are perfected, a human has got to take the fall.

Q: So you can't blame it on the computer models?

A: Exactly right.

Q: How about weather forecasting outside the U.S.? In many technologically sophisticated nations, you don't really see the in-depth forecasting that you find in the U.S. What is it about the U.S. that fosters something like TWC?

A: I don't think any other country in the world is more susceptible to the weather than we are. It's also our livelihood. I don't think there's any place that has more to lose due to natural or weather disasters.

Q: Has global warming had an impact on weather forecasting?

A: I think it has. I believe that the extreme events have become more extreme. First of all, there's no question that the globe is warming. Yes, it's warmed before, but if you look at the data, you can see a lot of signs of very recent warming. Alaska, for example, is



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warming four times faster than any other place in the world. The Greenland ice sheet is melting. The Antarctic ice sheet is melting. Every day, something comes out about warming, and it's definitely going to be the biggest issue of your and my lifetime. For the 75 percent of the world's population that lives on the seacoast, when you start talking about melting ice, there's a problem, because that ice has to go somewhere. It doesn't matter whether you believe we've contributed or not. I think people need to look at their planet and say, "Hey, what can I do better here? Do I need to use 400 gallons of water every time I take a shower? Should I use these high-efficiency light bulbs? Do I need to burn this much gas? How can I do my part?" There's nothing bad about asking those questions. Nothing.

Q: You do charity work for the Fragile X foundation (fraxa.org). How did you get involved with that?

A: Well, my kids have Fragile X, and that's obviously a huge deal. Fragile X is one of these neurological disorders, like autism. It shows up more in boys, as a mental impairment that causes learning difficulties and makes them hypersensitive. And it's hard on Mom and Dad. So I make appearances. Recently, we were in Marblehead, Massachusetts, for a big fundraiser. Doris Buffet, Warren Buffet's sister, was there, and she's been just wonderful. She basically agreed to match every dollar that we made up to November 1, and you're talking about close to a million dollars. For a long time, I didn't say anything about it. *Guideposts*, the nondenominational religious magazine, approached me about doing an article, so I wrote "The Storms in My Life." I was thinking, "What good are you doing these kids by keeping this to yourself?" It's a very motivating thing in my life.

Q: What do you do in your downtime?

A: Love to ski, love to play some golf; softball is great when I can play at night.

Q: Do you get your fill of skiing stationed in Atlanta?

A: No. But it has nothing to do with being based in Atlanta. It has everything to do with my life. My busy life. I've been on ski trips where I've had to come home because of big storms. But that's the job.

Anyway, I love Crested Butte and Steamboat [Colorado]. My kids learned to ski there. There's also Wisp in Maryland; even though it's a smaller resort, it's been fun for us. But it's really easier for me to go out West than to the Northeast. Nothing against New England, believe me—it's where I learned how to ski. But the West is more predictable.

Q: Do you snowboard?

A: I do not snowboard. I don't get to ski enough during the year, so I figure, as long as I can ski, why not just enjoy myself instead of bruising myself? I mean, I love to ski, and the snowboard lessons didn't work out as well as I thought.

Q: What do you see for your future?

A: I like going out in the field. I really do, even though it's hard. It's a different world today. As for just going out and doing a few shots here and there and coming on at night again, it doesn't work like that. It takes a good deal of stamina. I've got to be in physical and mental shape to go out in the field. As for my future, I don't know. I don't really see the end of the tunnel. I think I'll always want to be out in something, because it's just me. I'm not someone who wants to sit around all day or have a predictable life.

Q: You're in the right business then, aren't you?

A: Yeah, absolutely. I know that. I got a call the other morning—"Jim, you're going to California." But you meet so many sweet people out there. I'm talking about people who are just genuinely sweet and come up to you and thank you for being there. I remember in 1996 during Hurricane Fran. I was on the beach in North Carolina, and this lady came up to me with the most sincere tone and look about her. She said, "Jim, you know what? I know it's gonna get bad, but I just want to thank you for being here to take us through it. I feel safer having you take me through this." So I feel like this is my job: helping take people through the good, the bad, and the ugly. ▀

Arnie Cooper's first published article was "Confessions of a Weather Fanatic" in Weatherwise Magazine. His non-weather nut writing has appeared in Esquire, Dwell, and The Wall Street Journal.



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