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His new look,
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Dawson's Peak

His role as prime time's most hopeless romantic made him a TV superstar. **James Van Der Beek** talks about his fast rise to fame, his newest movie role and how he really *is* different from Dawson

At a nightclub in Austin, Texas, James Van Der Beek

is trying very hard to do something that comes naturally to most 21-years-olds. He wants to blend in. It's a late night in April, and the *Dawson's Creek* star has managed to enter the club incognito, perhaps because he's missing his familiar blond locks. (His current dark, semi-buzzed haircut is for his football-playing character in *Varsity Blues*, the film that has brought him here on location.) But his moment of sweet anonymity doesn't last long.

"You go out and you're just talking to somebody and it's like, 'Hey, how's it going?' And you talk to her for two seconds [and then she says], 'Oh, my God, are you Dawson from *Dawson's Creek*? When are you going to get together with Joey?' It's like, 'Oh, God! I'll see you later, nice to meet you.'"

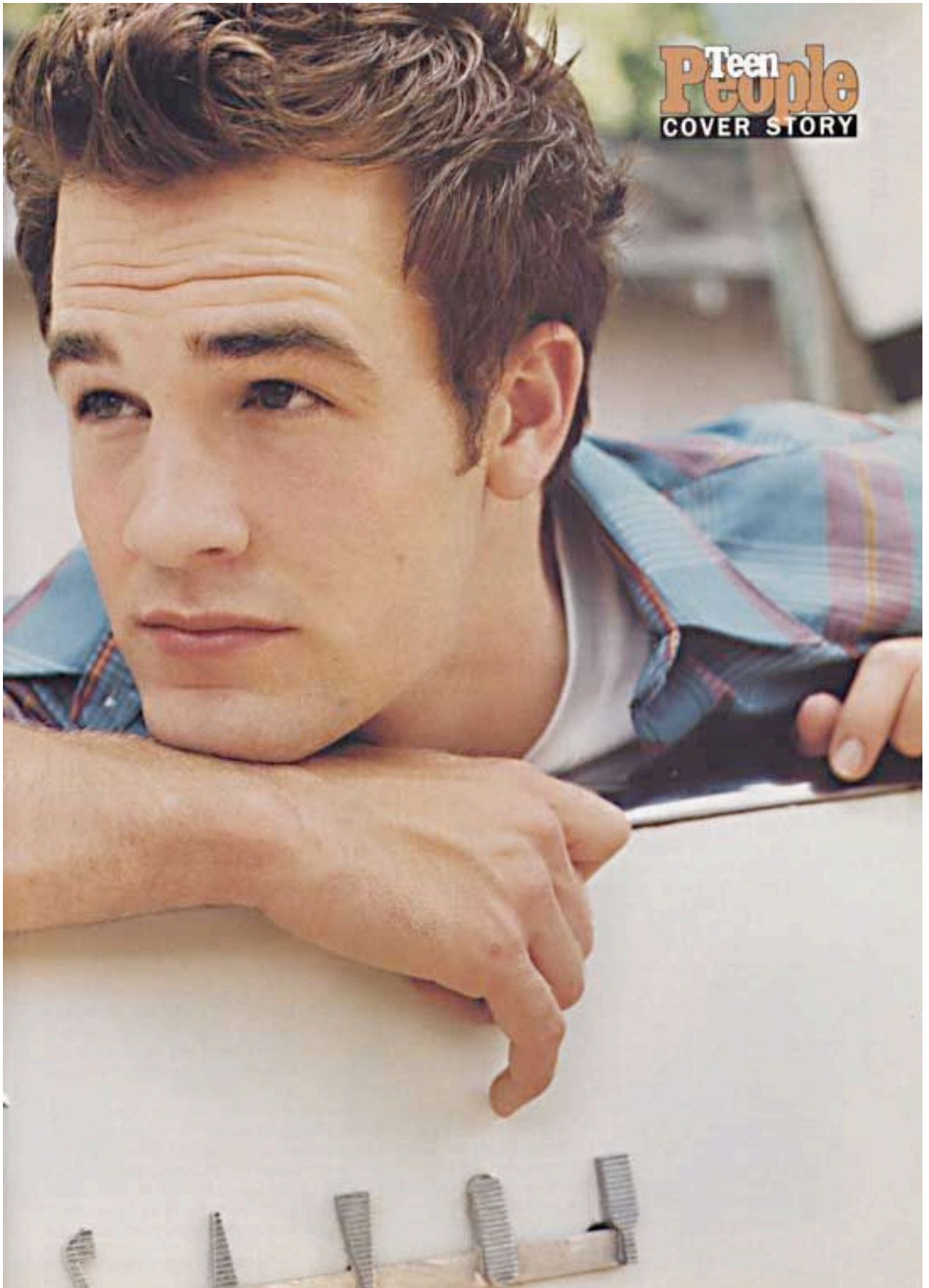
A year ago, the soft-spoken actor could have climbed up on the bar and yelled "I'm Dawson from *Dawson's Creek*!" and no one would have cared. Back then, he and three other little-knowns (*Creek* costars Katie Holmes, Joshua Jackson and Michelle Williams) were quietly toiling away in Wilmington, N.C., on a new series for The WB. But the show's almost immediate success after it hit the airwaves last January changed everything for its young cast. Now, coming up on its second season, the sexy drama—which, in its debut year, garnered the highest ratings among female teens of any network show in its time slot—has cannonballed James into the stratosphere of stars who can't go out without shades. ▶

BY JENNIFER GRAHAM

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHERYL NIELDS

"It was my idea to dye my hair," says James of his new look for *Varsity Blues*. "I wouldn't want people to look up on screen and see Dawson."

Teen
People
COVER STORY



Why all the fuss over some guy who plays a nearly nerdy high school student named Dawson Leery? Perhaps it's because his character speaks so eloquently of many of the matters close to young women's hearts—whether he's pining for the mysterious Jen or finally recognizing his attraction to his life-long girl friend, Joey.

"He's the one everybody loves to love," says Joshua Jackson, James's Wilmington roommate, who plays Dawson's sarcastic pal Pacey Witter. "I don't have to worry about throngs of girls. That's more James's thing." But James refuses to bask in Dawson's glow: "I honestly don't see how someone could get a big ego out of it, because it's not you." Could this be true? Is James Van Der Beek actually nothing like Dawson?

the real James

In command of a two-person Jet Ski out on Austin's Lake Travis, James is asked by his passenger—this TEEN PEOPLE reporter—to demonstrate the limits of the machine. As eager to please as his TV alterego, he obediently revs the engine, making the vehicle spin hard in the wake of passing speedboats. Then, unexpectedly, he shifts into Evel Knievel mode, thrusting the Jet Ski high into the air and crashing it down again, nearly throwing his guest overboard. Finally, after a hair-raising 10 minutes, the thrill-ride comes to an end. "I'm surprised you didn't fall off," he says, flashing a devilish grin.

Here is what separates James from Dawson: While the likable (but predictable) Dawson views his life through rose-colored glasses, the edgier, more daring James doesn't. But he still comes out smelling like a rose. (After all, the high-speed ride was a blast.)

James's ability to disarm through charm has been serving him since he was a kid growing up in a "modest, little split-level house...not as big as Dawson's" in the suburban town of Cheshire, Conn. The son of Jim, an account manager for Southern New England Telecommunications Corp., and Melinda, a gymnastics-studio owner, James (who has a brother, Jared, 19, and a sister, Juliana, 17) attended Cheshire Academy boarding school as a

day student. At an early age, he overcame dyslexia, a learning disability that can hinder reading. "They caught it while I was in kindergarten; [I learned to read] in a special experimental class. I didn't even know I was dyslexic until I was a junior in high school," he says. By then James had become a real-life Brandon Walsh: an academic scholarship recipient, a National Honor Society member, a student proctor and a choir member. Yes, he was good at everything. "Kind of enough to make you puke," he says.

But James used his good standing with the faculty and administrators to his advantage. The school's dress code (jacket, suit pants and tie) offended his sense of style, so he showed up every day in a comfy pair of gray Dockers, without a blazer. "Nobody ever said a word to me," he laughs. The same did not apply for one of his best friends, Sarah DiMeo, who once tried to wear James's school-approved pants in place of her own uniform skirt. She was called into the dean's office, and when the dean asked whose pants they were, James recalls, "She said, 'James Van Der Beek's! You people are so stupid! He's never worn these pants, and you never say a word to him because he's James!'"

Perhaps it's because he's "James" that he also managed to juggle schoolwork with his real passion—acting. Felled by a concussion in a gym-class accident when he was in eighth grade, James swapped his role of football running back for the less dangerous one of Danny Zuko in a local production of *Grease*. By the time he graduated high school, he'd signed up with an agent and appeared in local community theater productions, an off-Broadway play called *Finding the Sun*, and the 1995

movie *Angus* (in which he played a mean-spirited football player—"the kind of guy who would have beat up Dawson"). After missing three and a half months of his senior year to film *Angus* in L.A., he had to complete two semesters at once, basically learning chemistry and calculus on his own.

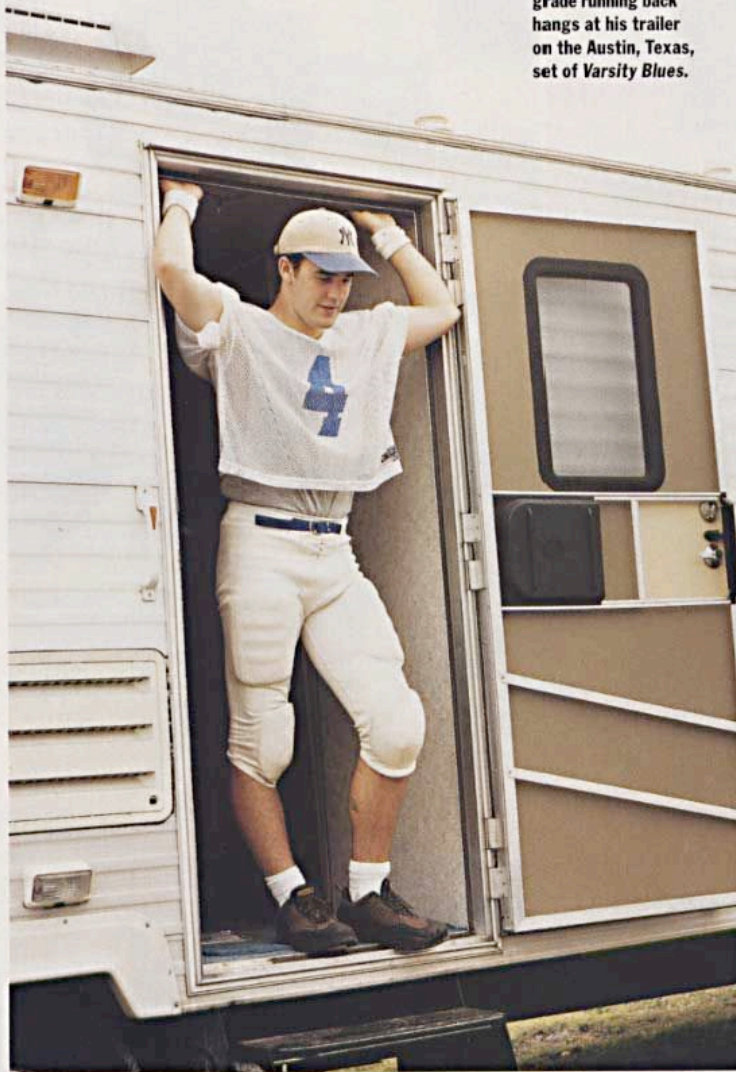
Later that year, he landed a part in the movie *I Love You, I Love You Not* alongside the freshly famous Claire Danes—and got his first glimpse of teen ideldom. "She'd just come off *My So-Called Life*," says James. "I watched her walk from her trailer to the set [in New York City], and thirty 13-year-old

"He's the one everybody loves to love. I don't have to worry about throngs of girls. That's more James's thing."
—Joshua Jackson

girls would come out of the woodwork and not say a word. They just walked next to her." His time would come.

But first came Drew University in Madison, N.J., where the English major befriended Sarah Suzuki, 21, his "real-life Joey"—although their relationship doesn't have the romantic subtext. Sarah agrees with this characterization, to an extent: "We don't argue like they do," she says. "But I am like Joey in that we're both tomboys, and that she's very protective of Dawson." During his first year and a half in school, he often traveled to New York City for auditions, none of which panned out. Finally, in ►

The former eighth-grade running back hangs at his trailer on the Austin, Texas, set of *Varsity Blues*.



in the morning talking. Then we'd hike up to an all-night diner," Sarah recalls. He also sang in a campus cappella group called 36 Madison Ave.

The summer after his sophomore year, James went to Oxford, Pa., to film another movie, *Harvest*, which is yet to be released, and then headed straight to North Carolina to start shooting *Dawson's Creek*. His last two years of college would have to wait.

the fame game

Tanned and tired from his afternoon out on the water, James sits at a table on the patio of the Four Seasons Hotel in Austin. He's been in Texas for four weeks shooting *Varsity Blues* (due out next year), in which he plays a quarterback at a small-town Texas high school. Tonight his dinner companions—*Varsity* costar (and James's on-screen girlfriend) Amy Smart, 22, and three young actors from *The Faculty*, another teen movie shooting in town—are considering a late-night trip to the city's club-filled 6th Street. James, however, will not be joining them. He has to be ready for work at 5:45 the next morning, but he harbors no complaints. He loves the script, especially since his character, John "Mox" Moxon, is more "aggressive" and "effectual" than Dawson.

"If there's something [Mox] wants, he generally goes out and gets it," says James. "It's fun to tap into that part of my personality." But despite his love for football (specifically for the Green

"I can't stay up worrying what other people are going to think of me." —James Van Der Beek

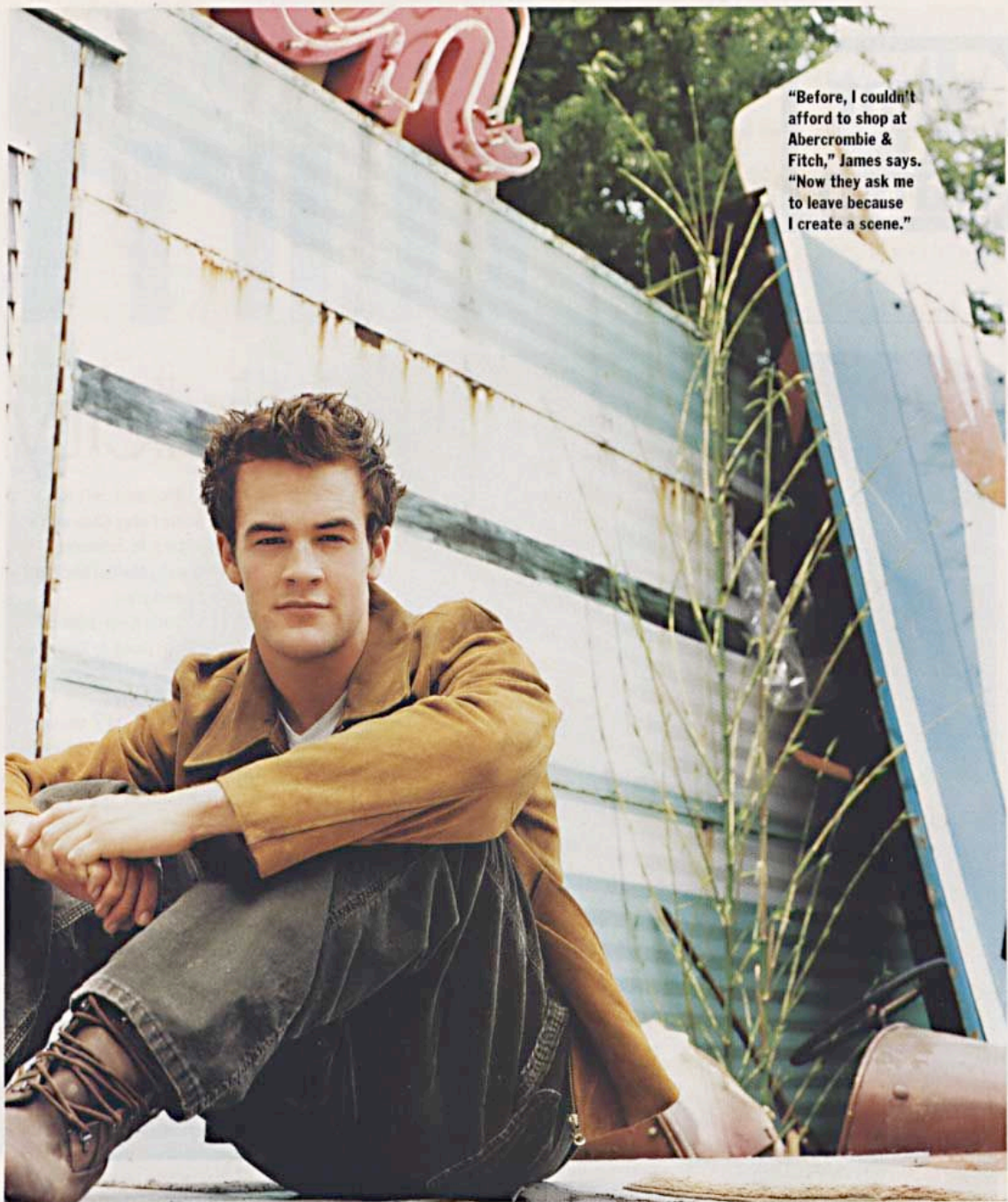
his sophomore year, he snagged the coveted title role in *Scream* writer Kevin Williamson's new TV series, *Dawson's Creek*. Once again he found himself missing school—a week of classes to shoot the show's pilot. He also managed to fit in a play in New York. And he still got good grades.

"I have never seen a boy so lucky," Sarah says. "James was bent on graduating Drew without having to check out

one single book from the library. I don't understand how this boy does it—he'd get these incredible grades." (James says he paid attention in class—when he was there.) Like Dawson and Joey, James and Sarah bypassed the party scene and spent their downtime hanging with two other friends in his room, which was adorned with posters of The Beatles and the Dave Matthews Band. "James would play guitar, and we'd stay up until four

Bay Packers), James admits that he wasn't eager to star in a film so soon.

"If this movie bombs, people [will] say, 'Oh, he can't open a film.'" And if it doesn't bomb? "Hopefully after this, people will see me as an actor as opposed to just a television personality. But I can't stay up worrying what other people are going to think of me," he says. Still, making the jump to the big screen will give James his much-desired



"Before, I couldn't afford to shop at Abercrombie & Fitch," James says. "Now they ask me to leave because I create a scene."

JACKET AND T-SHIRT, DIESEL; PANTS, GAP; BOOTS, DICKIES.

chance to break free of the Dawson image. "Hopefully, in this movie people will see another side of him—the side I bring out," jokes Amy, a preppy, dark-haired beauty who is eerily reminiscent of Katie Holmes, *Dawson's Joey*. Of their romantic scenes, Amy comments, "Sometimes [those] scenes don't always flow. [But] I just felt...the connection with James, and the fire."

As for his actual love life, James admits that he's met someone, "but I don't

even know exactly what's up. She and I are both waiting to see what happens." At this early stage, he won't be telling a national magazine about it. "I cringe when people do that...[then have] to go through a breakup in the public eye." Besides, he knows that his fans are more interested in what's going to happen with Dawson and Joey. (He hasn't been let in on the secret himself, yet.) He will say, however, that the notion of Dawson as a sex symbol makes him chuckle.

"[Dawson is] the antisex symbol," he says. "He's not the kind of guy who runs around with a gun, kills [bad guys], then sleeps with the woman at the end. He'd probably totally screw it up and shoot the wrong person. But he'd be totally earnest while doing it." ☘

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