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Sports

An Accomplished Ally Rides Shotgun

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Jimmie Johnson strolled into [Foley's Pub and Restaurant](#) in Midtown Manhattan just after 2 p.m. Wednesday and ordered a round for the house, including two dozen [NASCAR](#) fans who probably would have been happy just to say hello to him.



Geoff Burke/Getty Images for Nascar

Jimmie Johnson, left, and his crew chief, Chad Knaus, have won three consecutive Nascar Cup championships.

Johnson is in New York this week to celebrate his third consecutive Nascar Cup championship and to pitch stock-car racing in a city that has never warmed to it. At Foley's, a bar packed with sports memorabilia, there is one case of die-cast Nascar models, way in the back corner.

A man wearing a blazer and a scarf entered [Foley's](#) virtually unnoticed a few minutes later. Chad Knaus, 37, has been Johnson's crew chief for all three of his championships, and Johnson probably would not have won the titles without him.

While a young fan was persuaded by her mother to show Johnson her "Jimmie Johnson dance," Knaus sat just off to Johnson's right, quietly playing with a new pocket-size video recorder, happy to be a spectator at another show starring Johnson.

"I think I get plenty of attention," Knaus said. "Do I have jets, a million cars, a yacht? No. But every day, when I get up, I never complain about going to work."

He is, at least for now, the top crew chief in the business, a title he would like to keep. But he apparently has been more than that at Hendrick Motorsports. Knaus, a crew chief for his father when he was 14, has pushed his crew, and Johnson, onward.

"His attention to detail and his work habits have made all of our people step up," Rick Hendrick, the owner of Johnson's Chevrolet, said about Knaus. "What impresses me about him is that there are a lot of smart, innovative crew chiefs, but some of those guys get on the pit box in the middle of a race and go blank."

If anything, Knaus has sweated too many details about preparing Johnson's racecar. During the 2006 and 2007 seasons, Nascar suspended Knaus after discovering that parts on Johnson's cars were illegally adjusted or did not meet specifications.

Knaus was not suspended this year, joking Wednesday that this was the first of Johnson's three championship seasons in which he was allowed to attend every event. But that does not mean Knaus has softened. He took only three or four days off last season.

"I'm a racer," he said, then added: "I love pushing the rules. That's why I have a job."

Hendrick, whose drivers have won eight series championships, said, "If there's an unwritten rule to be pushed, an envelope, a gray area, well, that's his job."

Knaus became the first crew chief to win three straight championships at Nascar's highest level. Cale Yarborough won driving titles in 1976, '77 and '78, but Herb Nab, Yarborough's crew chief for the first two titles, left after the 1977 season.

Johnson's third title was not as easy as it looked. After finishing 33rd in a March 2 race at Las Vegas — in front of executives from Lowe's, his sponsor — Johnson was in 14th place. For a while, he did not think he would make the Chase for the Sprint Cup.

But Knaus kept tinkering, and Johnson later posted three straight top-five finishes to crack the top five in the standings. He held off Carl Edwards to win the Chase, finishing in the top 15 in all 10 Chase races and winning three.

"From my perspective, he deserves all the credit in the world," Johnson said Wednesday. "If you look at all the crew chiefs, and look at their stats, he's head and shoulders above all the rest. He's certainly an innovator. He works hard to find speed."

Nascar has suspended testing at its tracks in the 2009 season to cut costs, but Knaus has already compiled a list of other tracks at which Johnson may be able to test. In October, Knaus started preparing for the 2009 Daytona 500, which is scheduled for Feb. 15.

About two weeks ago, Hendrick said he visited his garage. Two of his cars were being tested — Johnson's No. 48 and the No. 24 car driven by [Jeff Gordon](#) — and both cars had already been trimmed with all of their decals.

"Ready to go to Daytona," Hendrick said, smiling.