

'Grandpa' Johnson Determined To Win 8th NASCAR Championship

BY DAN GELSTON
ASSOCIATED PRESS

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Jimmie Johnson has never hitched a ride for an afternoon on a champion's float that snakes down closed city streets.

The professional sports teams bask in the celebration of hundreds of thousands of fans screaming in adulation and spraying beer from sidewalks in a frenzy as confetti flies from the sky.

Johnson's top reward for winning it all, a rally once at one of his sponsor's stores a few miles away from his California hometown.

The NASCAR champion traditionally gets a party in victory lane at the season finale and throws a bash at the postseason banquet.

It's all good fun, but even a seven-time champion wouldn't mind a parade.

"I have to admit, that would be a nice add to the NASCAR champions schedule," Johnson said. "It would be really cool."

Johnson, a regular visitor to the White House when he reigned as NASCAR's champ, had already initiated his own champion's tradition a few years back.

Inspired by a chat with NASCAR official Mike Helton and the presidential tradition of leaving a handwritten letter to the successor, Johnson started a champion's journal.

His first entry was a December 2011 letter to series champion Tony Stewart. Johnson followed championship seasons with notes for Kevin Harvick and 2017 champ Martin Truex Jr., and the keepsake is handed off at the banquet.

"There seems to be a thread when it comes back to me about me having more entries than anyone else," Johnson said with a laugh outside his motorhome. "That kind of finds its way in each time I get it back."

The journal is thick enough for quite a few more lines of teasing, well wishes and advice left to be composed. But the question looms for the 42-year-old Johnson, can he still fill the blank pages left as he comes off the worst season of his career?

Or, is the handwriting on the wall that a new crop of stars is ready to deny Johnson another title for as many years as he has left?

Believe that at your own risk.

"I signed up for three more years and I feel like I have the team and the ability to win all three of them," Johnson said. "We won five in a row and I want to believe in three in a row."

Johnson was never really a serious contender in 2017 to push past Dale Earnhardt and Richard Petty and win his record eighth NASCAR crown. He won three races (but none after June), had a career-worst four top-fives and finished 10th in the standings.

There are about 30 other drivers in the Daytona 500 field who would love to craft that kind of season. At Hendrick Motorsports, long the class organization of NASCAR, Johnson and crew chief Chad Knaus were considered underachievers with the No. 48 Chevrolet.

The Chevy ran slower in the second half of the season, and the team could never click and go on their traditional late-season surge; consider he won three of the final seven races in '16 to clinch his seventh championship.

"That was the first time at Hendrick that I've had that happen," Johnson said. "I couldn't have asked anything more from anybody on the team. Everybody was all in. That's where the frustration comes from."

The struggles did nothing to deter the Hendrick lifer from signing a three-year contract extension that



Crew chief Chad Knaus, left, and Jimmie Johnson watch the leaderboard during qualifying for the NASCAR Daytona 500 auto race at Daytona International Speedway on Sunday in Daytona Beach, Fla.

AP PHOTO BY TERRY RENNA

should keep him with the team through 2020. Johnson, whose 83 wins are tied for sixth on the NASCAR career Cup series list, was already the top dog at Hendrick.

Now, he's the oldest dog on the Hendrick block, trying to teach his three 20-something teammates new tricks.

Daytona 500 pole-sitter Alex Bowman is 24. Cup rookie William Byron is 20. Chase Elliott is 22.

The trio's combined Cup wins: 0.

But the nicknames for the two-time Daytona 500 winner are adding up.

"We call him Grandpa every now and then," Bowman said.

"I would say Uncle Jimmie," Elliott said.

For a stately veteran, Johnson can still show the young'uns a good time. Johnson, a ski junkie in Aspen, Colorado, hit the slopes with Elliott before they hit

the town for a couple of nights.

"I even heard him say, 'Wow this is what 40 looks like. Not bad,'" Johnson said. "I guess we can still have enough fun for a 22-year-old and make it cool."

Johnson tweeted a photo of himself from behind the wheel of his family car with Bowman and Byron tagging along in car seats.

Johnson, though, is steadfast that he will do his part to shape the next generation of Hendrick stars into regular challengers for checkered flags. He invites teammates into the hauler for chats, talks game plans with the other crew chiefs, and the fitness freak has even suggested healthy diet tips.

"Jimmie loves that role, and I think these guys will tell you he's there," team owner Rick Hendrick said.

Bowman must be listening: He won the Daytona

500 pole.

Retired four-time champion Jeff Gordon is still a trusted adviser at HMS and Hendrick said he was having as much fun as he had in years with an injection of youth into the organization.

If 2017's transition season led to stagnation across the lineup, Hendrick's focus this season on returning the team to championship form has Johnson fired up.

"I've never seen him more committed than he is right now," Hendrick said.

Johnson's outside interests — including an ownership stake in a taco shop and a speakeasy; bike rides and marathons; and a blossoming interest in the NFL's Carolina Panthers ("I'd love to have a shot at it. But I don't think I can stretch the capital they need.") — have never affected his race preparation each weekend.

Johnson's championship crew chief Chad Knaus' deal is up at the end of the

season, though Hendrick said he would work on an extension. Knaus is connected with Johnson in much the same way as Pat Riley and Magic Johnson or Joe Torre and Derek Jeter. One calls the shots and the other leads them to glory — and Johnson wants to keep the tag team intact.

"I know the dog years he lives in and I've anticipated at some point there might be a separation," he said. "I can't see it in the near future, so I hope to stay together. I've told him that we started this thing together, let's end this thing together."

Johnson, who wrecked in Speedweeks exhibition Clash at Daytona, is determined to end it alone atop the championship count.

"He wants No. 8," Hendrick said.

The one that would wipe away the doubt and stamp him as NASCAR's greatest champion.

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