By JENNA FRYER

The Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — As Jimmie Johnson racked up win after win, championship after championship, he was always chasing one important victory. Johnson already had one Daytona 500 victory on his resume. But he needed one more. He needed it for Chad Knaus, the crew chief who has been with Johnson since the start of their ride into the record books. Knaus wasn't there the day Johnson won his first 500; he had been suspended by NASCAR for a technical violation found the week before the race was deemed to be deliberate. So Darian Grubb, still a Hendrick Motorsports employee at the time, called the 2006 Daytona victory in Knaus' place. Ever since, Johnson has wanted to win another so Knaus would have a chance to celebrate winning "The Great American Race." The time came Sunday when Johnson won his second Daytona 500, forcing the intensely private Knaus to admit just how badly he wanted the win with his No. 48 team. "As you guys know, I eat, sleep and breathe 48," Knaus said. "Anytime that I'm taken away from that race car, I'm pretty sad. But when those guys were able to come down here and win the Daytona 500 in 2006 in my absence, I think that really solidified the strength of the 48 car. Was I here? No. Was I here in spirit? Most definitely. I couldn't have been prouder of the group of guys we had there. "But to finally be able to come down here and win and be a part of this is definitely a huge dream come true."

It was a moment Knaus has been working toward his entire life. He has sacrificed plenty in his personal life to get here. With no wife and no kids, he's not kidding when he says he devotes most of his time to Hendrick Motorsports and building championship race cars. He is not satisfied with what he and Johnson have accomplished since they were paired before Johnson's 2002 rookie season — and that includes five Sprint Cup championships.

No amount of wins or titles has so far satisfied Knaus. It's been two years since Johnson's last title and he went down to the wire with Brad Keselowski last season before bad breaks in the final two races gave Keselowski his first championship. So Knaus was relentless — of course — during offseason preparations. And he devoted a considerable amount of time to the Daytona 500, the first race for NASCAR's new Gen-6 car. "I know we worked at least 35 days straight on the car that we raced in the Daytona 500," Knaus noted. "I know I put in personally one day of 38 hours straight. I actually sent Jimmie a text, saying 'I've seen 6:48 three times today and

haven’t been to bed yet’.”

Knaus believes that drive is the difference between the No. 48 team and the competition. “I think what we have above everybody else is the desire to go out and win races,” he added. “We’ve got 500 plus employees at Hendrick Motorsports. When they all want to go out and win races, you put guys like (Johnson) behind the seat, you’re going to see magic happen.”

This Daytona 500 win comes at a time of change for Knaus, who is trying as hard as he can to have a life away from racing. He got engaged in December to long-time girlfriend Lisa Rockelmann, who understands when he doesn’t come home for 38 consecutive hours. Team owner Rick Hendrick believes Knaus is in a far better place now than he was in 2006 and the balance Knaus has added to his life might not be enough for everyone, but it’s working for the crew chief. “You can’t be 100 percent and live in the shop and work on the car and if you don’t win, you can’t live with yourself,” Hendrick said. “He’s learned to have other pieces in his life.”

__PUBLIC__