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CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Chad Knaus, with five championships and 62 victories as Jimmie Johnson's crew chief, always appears unflappable at the race track.

He walks with confidence, a purpose, and seems to effortlessly lead his team through times of crisis.

Is it really just a facade?

That's the impression Knaus gave this week in the lead-up to the Brickyard 400, where he and Johnson seek a record-tying fifth victory at Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

"It's kind of funny; I always am in just a semi-state of a little bit of fear," Knaus admitted. "I'm not going to lie — I fear the fact that one day, we'll never win a race again. I fear the fact that one day I won't work with Jimmie again. I fear the fact that one day, I won't have this amazing facility at Hendrick Motorsports to work in. And I try to work as hard as I can every single day to go out there and win races because I know at some point in time, it's going to go away. And you just can't take anything for granted."

The duo of Johnson and Knaus has taken nothing for granted since they were paired by Rick Hendrick as the nucleus of the startup No. 48 team in 2002.

Knaus was relentless in his preparation and had Johnson in Victory Lane a mere 10 races into their relationship. There were three wins that rookie year, including a sweep at Dover that positioned Johnson as the series points leader with seven races left in the season.

Those victories and flirting with a championship made Knaus push even harder and the next

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two seasons led to 10 wins and a pair of runner-up finishes in the title race.

There were four wins in 2005 and Johnson went into the season finale ranked second with a shot at the title. But the behind-the-scenes tension, fueled in part by Knaus' relentless drive, nearly fractured the team. A tire issue caused Johnson to crash in the finale, finish fifth in the standings and led Hendrick to force his driver and crew chief to examine their relationship.

Given the choice to repair their relationship or be split apart by the team owner, both Johnson and Knaus chose to continue pushing on together.

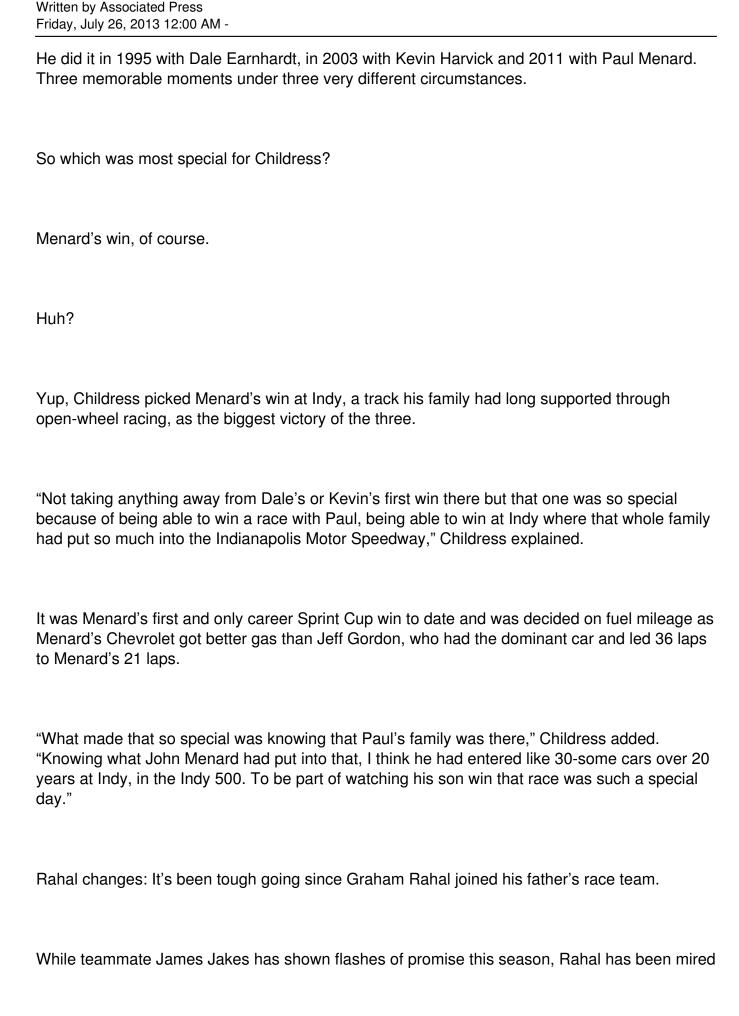
Five championships and 44 wins later, the two are the longest active crew chief and driver pairing in NASCAR and have shown no signs of letting up. Johnson heads into Sunday's race with four victories and a 56-point cushion over second-place Clint Bowyer in the standings.

Knaus believes the two have grown together over the last decade and spend time together away from the track, as they did during the final off weekend of the NASCAR season.

"It's like any other relationship, it grows and there's an ebb and flow of good times and bad," Knaus added. "Jimmie and I have been very fortunate over the years to have gotten a good appreciation and mutual respect for one another. We expanded on that relationship again this weekend, so we've had a few of those opportunities where we've been able to have a few beers and play some reindeer games.

"Now we are to the point where I can understand where it is and how off we are with the race car based on his body language and what he says and his feedback. And he can definitely see with my feedback and my body language and the tone of my voice, he knows what's happening from my perspective and that's always good. It's a lot of different levels; it's pretty good for us."

Ranking the wins: Richard Childress has kissed the bricks at Indianapolis three times with three different drivers as a car owner.



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at the back of the grid and unable to make many gains.

As the prodigal son sits 17th in the IndyCar standings with just one podium finish, father Bob Rahal has taken steps at Rahal Letterman Lanigan to attack the final five races of the season with a fresh eye.

The team this week made three key personnel changes, including moving race engineer Gerry Hughes head of development for the IndyCar program.

Neil Fife, who led Ryan Hunter-Reay to the team's last victory in 2008, will be Rahal's race engineer for the remainder of the season. Mitch Davis was named crew chief, a role that makes him responsible for preparation of the cars for both Rahal and Jakes.

"I'm really pleased about these additions of personnel and roles," added Bobby Rahal. "I want to thank Gerry for his hard work and efforts over the past year and a half as race engineer and I'm grateful that he has taken on the new role as head of development to ensure our success in the future.

"The last Indy car race we won in 2008 with Ryan Hunter-Reay was with Neil at the helm as race engineer, so it's great to have him back. I'm confident that he and Graham will work well together and we can have a successful last third of the season. Finally, having Mitch join the team is the result of a courtship of many, many years. He brings a wealth of experience and knowledge with him and will ensure that the cars are put on the race track according to specification. These changes will be a big plus for us going forward."

X Games tribute: Travis Pastrana will pay tribute to his beloved X Games with a special paint scheme on his No. 60 Ford for the upcoming races at Indianapolis Motor Speedway and Iowa Speedway.

Pastrana, a 17-time medal winner — 11 golds — at the X Games, will go directly from the Aug. 3 race at lowa to Los Angeles to compete in RallyCross.

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"X Games are the single biggest action sports event in the world," said Pastrana. "I've been able to make a career out of having fun and pushing the limits because of the platform provided by this event. I love everything about it."

Pastrana's first gold in 1999 made him the youngest winner in freestyle motocross. In 2006, Pastrana put himself in rare company, winning three golds in a single X Games, where he became the first person to land a double-backflip on a motorcycle.

Pastrana hopes his paint scheme and his double-duty this year helps create awareness for the two sports.

Spotlight on tires, Vettel's rivals in Hungary

BUDAPEST, Hungary — The pressure will be on tire manufacturer Pirelli as much as those trying to catch Formula One championship leader Sebastian Vettel at the Hungarian Grand Prix this weekend.

While Vettel's rivals try to stop him from extending his lead before the mid-season summer break, Pirelli hopes its much-lamented tires withstand the meltingly hot temperatures expected Sunday outside of Budapest.

Last week, the teams held in-season testing sessions at Silverstone to assess new tires provided by Pirelli. Several spectacular blowouts on the same circuit at the British Grand Prix in June prompted a furious response and boycott threat from drivers.

The 3-time defending champion Vettel says "we have asked for tires that are safe," and "it's hard to know what to expect here."

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Jordan Taylor takes Grand-Am pole

INDIANAPOLIS — Jordan Taylor earned his fourth straight Grand Am-Rolex Sports Car Series pole Thursday, turning a lap in 1 minute, 22.251 seconds at 110.909 mph on Indianapolis Motor Speedway's 2.534-mile, 13-turn road circuit.

The 22-year-old Taylor teams with Italy's Max Angelelli in Wayne Taylor Racing's No. 10 Velocity Worldwide Corvette Dallara DP. Taylor and Angelelli have victories this year in Alabama and Detroit and lead the team and driver standings.

Chip Ganassi Racing with Felix Sabates' No. 01 BMW Riley, driven by Memo Rojas and Scott Pruett, qualified second for the 3-hour race today.