

The man for the job

Alan Johnson, Top Fuel's winningest crew chief, is partnered with Al-Anabi Racing and set to shake things up in both nitro classes

INTERVIEW

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Easily the biggest bombshell of the 2008 season was the announcement of Alan Johnson's departure from Don Schumacher Racing to form his own Top Fuel and Funny Car teams with Al-Anabi Racing in 2009. There was great anticipation and speculation before the drivers and crew chiefs were revealed. Del Worsham, whose family operation was in jeopardy after ending its long-term relationship with CSK Auto, was named the Funny Car driver early on, and Larry Dixon left his 14-year post as a driver for Don "the Snake" Prudhomme to join Johnson during the off-season. With Dixon and Worsham and their respective crew chiefs, Jason McCulloch and Aaron Brooks, in place, the teams are working frantically to ready for the 2009 NHRA Full Throttle Drag Racing Series.

Johnson, 50, is the winningest crew chief in Top Fuel history with 78 wins between three drivers (Tony Schumacher, Gary Scelzi, and Johnson's late brother, Blaine) and has eight season titles to his credit in Top Fuel, including the last five consecutive championships, and four in Top Alcohol Dragster. His previous foray in the Funny Car ranks netted him two wins as a team owner in 2000 and 2001 with the late Bruce Sarver at the controls. The foundation of Johnson's new team is a five-year partnership with Al-Anabi Racing, which is headed by His Highness Sheikh Khalid Bin Hamad Al Thani. Al-Anabi Racing also fields several Pro Mod entries and has the goal of spreading domestic and international awareness of motorsports in the nation of Qatar, where they recently completed a state-of-the-art drag racing facility.

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With just over a week left for the team to get prepared at its Brownsburg, Ind., facility for its initial testing at Palm Beach Int'l Raceway Jan. 16-18, Johnson spoke from the Alan Johnson Performance Engineering headquarters in Santa Maria, Calif., with National DRAGSTER Associate Editor Brad Littlefield and outlined the details of his new team and addressed the challenges ahead.

Q: With testing coming up soon, how are things progressing?

A: It's going as well as can be expected. There is a tremendous amount of work to be done. We've only had two and a half months to get it done. The guys have done a great job and put in a lot of long hours.

Q: How far along are your teams at this point?

A: We have three dragsters pretty much assembled. By this weekend, we should have one dragster ready to make test runs. We should have one Funny Car ready by the following weekend. We plan on testing on Jan. 16-18 at Palm Beach [Int'l Raceway].

Q: What kind of work has been done so far to put this team together from the ground up and assemble its infrastructure and personnel?

A: You can imagine we've had to do everything because we started with no cars, no shop, no employees, nothing. We had to build everything from scratch. We had to put together a new shop, buy all of the support equipment, and put race cars together. It has been a very consuming two and a half months.

Q: What is your pit setup going to include?

A: We're going to have tech trailers for

each car. At some point, we're going to have a hospitality trailer as well.

Q: Had you been actively searching for the opportunity to own your own team again for a while, or did it just come about on its own?

A: I hadn't focused on it. There are always opportunities that come about. I've just kind of weeded through them all and waited for one that would work well. This one appears to be a pretty good opportunity, so I went ahead and took it.

Q: What made the Al-Anabi deal the right opportunity?

A: It's large enough, financially, and it's a good partnership with somebody who is driven by the sport of drag racing. Besides that, in these financial times that we are living in right now, [Al-Anabi Racing is] immune to the American economy to a certain extent. Hopefully, that will allow us to have a long-term relationship.

Q: What has been your experience with the Sheikh thus far?

A: We're still somewhat in our infancy. We've

only been partners in this for a few months. The experience has been great.

Q: How much of a hand does Al-Anabi Racing have in operations?

A: Well, they're as hands-on as they can be, being that they are 5,000 miles away. [Laughs] We pretty much take care of everything here in the United States. They've done everything they can on their side of the partnership, and we're doing everything we can on ours. The two things combined should make for a very successful race team.

Q: What's the probability of you racing in Qatar in the next off-season?

A: I'm fairly certain we'll be there next December.





Q: In what capacity?

A: That's still up in the air. Right now, we're focused on making sure we have cars that campaign at the beginning of this season. Once that goal is completed, we'll start to focus on future plans for international competition.

Q: With crew chiefs in place with each team, what is your role going to be from a tuning standpoint?

A: I'll still be active in the way the cars run; it would be crazy for me not to be. I possibly won't be as hands-on as I was before, and I'll probably focus most of my energy on the Funny Car. I think the dragster guys, being that a large percentage of them were with me during my years with the Army team, should be able to handle that car without a lot of help. That's my goal.

Q: You've obviously been extremely successful in Top Fuel. Do you feel as though you have unfinished business in the Funny Car ranks?

A: I suppose there is to a certain extent. It provides a different challenge. What life's all about is finding that challenge, overcoming it, and trying to make some money at it at the same time. I think that it will certainly keep my interest in drag racing for a few years.

Q: For the crew chief position on the dragster, you hired Jason McCulloch, who we know worked directly under you during your entire tenure with the Army team. Tell us about your relationship with

Funny Car crew chief Aaron Brooks.

A: Aaron fits the mold I envision of somebody who is very detail oriented. That is really important for a successful race team.

You need someone who can focus on the details and not bypass some of the more difficult things just to get the job done. We've worked together before, so I can trust him. I know his personality, and we get along well.

Q: What led you to deciding on drivers Larry Dixon and Del Worsham?

A: It's kind of a no-brainer, really. When Dixon became available, it would have been silly not to at least entertain that. He's a great driver, so we expect pretty good things there. As far as Worsham is concerned, I always thought that he was one of the best drivers in Funny Car. I think that driving the race car without having to worry about tuning the race car and paying the bills will make him an even better driver. We're looking forward to that.

Q: What obstacles do you have to overcome with the Funny Car in order to bring it up to the level of the dragster?

A: It's not going to happen overnight. We just need to get in there and mix it up with the guys. We've built the foundation here in the last two and a half months. We have all the tools we need and the right personnel. Then it's going to be a

matter of getting out there, making some test runs, going to the first race, and building a good foundation for our tune-up. We'll take it from there.

Q: Will you be working closely with Toyota on the bodies as you have in the past?

A: Sure. Those are the bodies we are going to run. We have a relationship with Toyota in 2009, and I hope we can bring good things to them. We'll continue to fine-tune the body over the next few years and hopefully be very successful at it.

Q: Are you going to miss having the crew chief role on a single team, or are you embracing your new role?

A: Winning 15 races in one season is pretty exciting stuff. The chances of it happening again are probably pretty slim. It certainly is a goal, and we can see that now. I'm going to enjoy watching the guys I worked with during the Army years take on the challenge of running the car on their own. Watching them succeed will be nearly as fun for me as doing it myself. I'll help them when they need some direction, but, for the most part they're going to be on their own, and it's going to be exciting to watch. I don't think that I'm going to miss that at all, especially with the challenge of helping the Funny Car team get in a position to challenge for a championship.

Q: Will car ownership force you to further divide your time between the race teams and Alan Johnson Performance Engineering, or will you be able to continue to focus as much time at your business?

A: It has to be the same

as it was before because I certainly have to focus throughout the year on AJPE. With the personnel I have in place, I don't think it will be necessary for me to spend any more time away from the shop than I have in the last few years.

Q: Do you get a great deal of satisfaction from watching people who have worked under you come into their own?

A: It's great to see people become successful in the sport. It's what we need because we've always had kind of a lack of quality crew chiefs. I think the more people who learn, develop, and get better at drag racing make the sport better. I'm all for it.

Q: With some of the old-school crew chiefs starting to retire, do you see a lot of new up-and-comers out there?

A: There are certainly a few. We have two new ones on our team. Aaron was crew chief on a car for a handful of races last year, but for the most part, he's still a rookie. Jason McCulloch is a rookie. There are a few of them out there who are rookies. You have to spend some time in the shoes of a crew chief before you can call yourself a crew chief because there is a lot of pressure. There is a lot of stuff that you really have to be able to focus on. It's a bit of a learning curve. I think there are a number of individuals out there who are progressing quite nicely. We'll have a number of very competitive cars for years to come. *ND*



5 QUESTIONS
Larry Dixon

Q: How do you look at going into a new season with a different team for the first time?

A: I've known most of the guys who are here for a long period of time. For example, I worked with Jason [McCulloch] on Larry Minor's team. Then he worked at one of the Funny Cars at Prudhomme's. Del [Worsham] signed my license, so we've been buddies ever since then. Aaron Brooks worked for "Snake" doing the short blocks on the dragster. Everybody is full steam ahead, gung ho about getting everything together so we can get out there.

Q: Was the length of the contract a factor in your decision to join this team?

A: Absolutely. That was definitely part of the lure. Being able to sign a long-term deal with Alan Johnson made it more comfortable for me and, obviously, my family.

Q: You've had to race against Alan over the years. How's life on the other side of the fence?

A: I'll let you know. [Laughs] I haven't raced with him yet. To be honest, I didn't know Alan that well, probably because we had to race against him. I knew his mom and his dad and his sister, Pam, and I knew [his brother] Blaine from racing fuel cars and alcohol cars back in the day. Their family is a close group, and I'm delighted to be here.

Q: How do you reflect on your 14 years driving for Snake Racing?

A: I had a great time. I got to do more in my

career than I ever could have imagined when I was there. I have nothing but great things to say about my time there and everybody there. It was time for a change.

Q: Have you talked to your successor, Spencer Massey, since this became official?

A: I met him for the first time [Jan. 7]. I watched him race through the last year or so. He's a really nice kid. Obviously, he's really excited about his opportunity. I'm happy for him, and he's getting in a great race car. There is no reason why he can't contend for a title. I think this whole deal has worked out well for everyone involved.

Seeing some of the pictures with "Snake" and Spencer together reminds me of when I was a kid, getting my break. I think it's great that "Snake" is giving somebody new an opportunity. That's what keeps the sport moving forward.