

Johnson and Knaus make questionable Chase move

By Jared Shanker

SUNDAY night, I laid in bed watching SportsCenter, checking out highlights from the NFL games I missed, just like I do every week.



MY OPINION

But crunched between video of the Lions finding yet another way to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory and Miami's Channing Crowder calling Baltimore's Le'Ron McClain a promiscuous woman in not-as-nice terms. I saw something that truly shocked me.

Jimmie Johnson (the NASCAR guy, not the adorable old NFL coach you see on late-night TV talking about his own, uh, surname) and crew chief Chad Knaus sent their pit crew to the bench and replaced it *in-race* with Jeff Gordon's.

Johnson and Knaus felt their pit crew wasn't doing a good enough job and costing Johnson

vital positions on the track.

No, I'm no NASCAR know-it-all by any means, but I like to think I know more about the sport than your average Yankee. Growing up in New Jersey — which pushed for a track before being rebuked by cries that parking a chair along the infamous Turnpike yields the same effect — I watched and knew enough about NASCAR that people questioned my "Northness."

But I had no idea that you could just up and switch pit crews with another driver, and I was in even more disbelief that there wasn't any rule in NASCAR preventing it.

The NBA, NHL, NFL all have trade deadlines. In addition to a deadline, MLB also mandates a player be on the 25-man active roster by Sept. 1 to be eligible for the playoffs.

Now, NASCAR seems like an anything goes kind of sport.

Drivers race at speeds closing in on 200 mph, wreck at speeds just as high and there are few repercussions for "accidentally" sending your fellow driver into the nearest retaining wall. But I did-

n't think you could just switch out half of your team with just two races left in the Chase for the championship, even if the two teams race for the same owner.

The first thing I thought of when I saw this was what if John Mara and Steve Tisch owned not only the Giants but the Jets, too, and after the Jets were eliminated from playoff contention, decided to switch the Giants' D for the Jets'? Roger Goodell's phone would blow up faster than you could say Jerry Jones.

Former driver and current ESPN analyst Ricky Craven likened it to the Phillies sending players to the Pirates for the playoffs. (Ricky's obviously either the eternal optimist or doesn't watch much baseball.) But Craven doesn't have a problem with NASCAR owners having the ability to switch crews.

"This sport is a little unique that an owner can have up to four teams," he said Tuesday in a telephone interview with The Daily Collegian.

"I don't see it as unfair. This sport is dominated by multi-car owners."

Asked if he thought NASCAR would look at it in the offseason, Craven simply said, "No."

OK, so let's move past that it seems a tad disturbing owners can do this and on to the fact that this isn't exactly your normal team doing it.

This is Jimmie Johnson and the No. 48 team, which has won four straight championships, something never before done. How do you give the crew, many of whom have been on the team for all four championship years, the boot with just two races left and within striking distance of a fifth title?

It seems like Johnson and Knaus are throwing the pit crew under the bus as the reason for dropping from first to second in the standings.

Is it true? Probably, and Craven likened losing spots on pit row to starting 1st and 20th time after time.

It turns out Richard Childress Racing made a similar move three weeks ago, swapping Kevin Harvick and Clint Bowyer's crew.

That move seemed to work, as Harvick gained five spots on pit

road in one instance the next race.

But where's the loyalty? It all seems a little nearsighted. It'll be hard to rebuild the chemistry and work through the hard feelings this will cause, but, at the moment, Johnson and Knaus have made it clear feelings are the last thing on their minds.

So, we'll know in two weeks if it turned out to be a smart move or if Johnson and Knaus potentially ruined a chance at, the very least, a fifth title, probably more. Craven, who said he would have also made the switch if in charge, isn't about to bet against history, however.

"Sure it comes with a ton of risk, but I'm willing to let it play out," Craven said, "because Chad's proven over the last four years he's right a whole lot more than he's wrong."

In this instance, winning a championship still may not be right.

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Defense a focal point for Lions heading into tournament

By Andrew Robinson
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Michigan forward Nkem Ezurike had a clear lane to Penn State's goal and took off running. From across the field, Emma Thomson raced in before going into a slide tackle in front of Ezurike.

Ezurike stumbled over Thomson and her momentum carried her forward, but she had lost something along the way. The ball rested against Thomson's shin guards, the Michigan attack prevented.

As the Penn State women's soccer team prepares for the NCAA Tournament, its defending will continue to be a focus this week.

Containing Ezurike and posting a 1-0 shutout win over Michigan was a good start.

"We knew what kind of player she was and how we were going to play against her and slow her down," Thomson

said about Ezurike. "She got in a few times, but not really, they didn't have that many shots on goal. The back line did well noticing that."

The Lions have four shutout wins this year, all coming in the Big Ten portion of the schedule. After positional moves and a Sept. 12 injury to sophomore Lexi Marton changed the look of the defense, the unit has come together over the past three weeks, allowing only two goals in four games.

Goalkeeper Krissy Tribbett has improved over the course of the year and said she has felt more confident in recent weeks, coming up with two vital late-game saves against Illinois on Oct. 24. Set piece defense has been something the team has worked on all year, and Tribbett and coach Erica Walsh said it's gotten better recently.

"Set pieces are, I think, about focus," Tribbett said. "As long as you focus, stay with your mark and get the ball out and just hard work getting to the ball, basically doing anything you can to get the ball out."

With Marton likely out for the rest of the year, junior Carly Niness has filled in admirably at centre back, despite having little experience as a defender before this season. Since returning from injuries, the outside back tandem of freshman Bri Hovington and sophomore Jackie Molinda have given the Lions width and offensive creativity out of the final third.

Tribbett said having a set unit of defenders to practice with every day, along with film breakdown, has been an asset to the defense's improvement. With that, Walsh said the commitment to team defending has been much better over the past month or so, and every player on the field is committed to shutting down the opposition.

The Lions' first round opponent, the University of Pennsylvania, often favors a 3-5-2 formation, which puts more of an emphasis on team defense. While the team has bought into that mindset, Tribbett said junior defensive

midfielder Ali Schaefer has been doing a good job organizing and directing the formation in front of the defense.

Through all the changes and turbulence of the early season, Thomson has personified consistency along the back. The junior co-captain is the only defender to start every game and has asserted herself as a vocal leader.

"A lot of that goes on to Emma's shoulders. She was the one that was carried over from last year, but she's the organizer of that group," Walsh said. "She keeps them consistent."

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WOMEN'S SOCCER



Sarah Finnegan/Collegian

Thomson (25) defends a Virginia player earlier this season.

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