

Close Calls: Object Getting Closer In Johnson's Mirrors

Jimmie Johnson has roared to a whopping 44-point lead in the NASCAR Sprint Cup championship 'Chase' regular season standings after just 11 events this season. A one point per position and 43 cars starting each event, the five-time NASCAR champion is ahead of the competition by one full race.

One full race. A couple of points more and Johnson could take a race off and still be at the top standings the following week. Impressive.

But as good as Johnson's two wins, eight top-10 finishes and an 11-race finishing average of 6.7 have been, there's trouble lurking in his rearview mirror and it's getting bigger.

Don't look now, but Matt Kenseth and Joe Gibbs Racing have it going on. They're fast, crazy fast in every race. This past weekend at Darlington, Kenseth stayed sizzling hot coming on at the end to win the 64th-Annual Southern 500 at Darlington Raceway.

Kenseth has been dominating in recent weeks. In his own words – he gave away a win after leading 142 of the 192 laps last weekend at Talladega. A week before at Richmond, Kenseth sat on the pole and led 140 laps eventually coming home seventh.

The week before that?

Kenseth crushed the field leading 162 of 267 at Kansas, his win setting off a firestorm of NASCAR technical penalties and controversy that has been a sideshow for the team throughout this most recent run of dominating performances.

Lightning quick, winning efforts every week despite the distractions.

No doubt, Johnson is having a great year. He finished fourth at Darlington Saturday and came home third at Kansas, 12th at Richmond and fifth at Talladega.

Tough to argue those results, but Johnson led only 25 laps in those five races and none on Saturday at Darlington. He's not exactly showing the way in any of these events. Saturday, the Gibbs' guys reduced him – and everyone else – to also-ran status regardless of finish.

Maybe that will all change as the series heads to Charlotte. At first blush, Johnson's stats there look great. He did win at CMS five times early in his career. His sixth, and

only CMS win since 2005, came in 2009. In the six Cup races, Johnson has posted three finishes of 28th or worse and a 19.3 finishing average.

No question here – Johnson's not going away. His consistency early this season has given him a leg up in the championship standings. But his Hendrick Motorsports Chevys aren't the fastest iron on the lot this season.

Johnson knows it. Everybody knows it.

That honor goes to Kenseth and JGR.

Birthday Shout Out

Good buddy Rich Bickle has another birthday today, Monday, May 13.

Spotted TBD – 'The Big Dummy' – in a lot of races during his career and had more fun than any of us ever imagined possible.

This season, Rich is calling it quits – he's on his own 'farewell tour' competing in more than 60 weekly and special short-track late model events at various raceways throughout the Midwest.

After that, he's going to concentrate on a new racing passion – an amazing snow-mobile design called Bickle Built Outlaw 600. Very cool stuff.

Anyway, just wanted to give a BD shout out my boy. If you have a chance, catch one of Bickle's races this year and a beer with him afterward. Pretty sure you'll enjoy both.

About John Close

John Close covered his first NASCAR race as a professional media member in 1986 at Bristol Motor Speedway. Since then, Close – a former Associated Press newspaper sports editor – has written countless articles for numerous motorsports magazines, trade publications and Internet sites

His Close Calls column appears each week on www.CloseFinishes.com, www.MotorsportAmerica.com and www.RacingNation.com.

Close has also authored two books - Tony Stewart - From Indy Phenom To NASCAR Superstar and NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series - From Desert Dust To Superspeedways.

Close also spotted more than 150 NASCAR Cup, Nationwide and Truck events from 1995-2008. His third book – On The Spot – a volume about the history of NASCAR race spotting, will be published later this year.

Close resides in Charlotte, NC with his wife Gail and son Sam.

You can direct comments/inquiries to Close at closefinishes@carolina.rr.com.

Herb Emory's Pit Row Report: Ragan Rocks Talladega

I couldn't help but think of that song, "How Do You Like Me Now," as Georgia's David Ragan snaked his way through and past the highest-funded NASCAR race cars to claim the checkered flag in Talladega. Ragan's former boss Jack Roush will probably not admit it, but the question had to pop in his mind, if Ragan can do that in a car that has much less money to operate on than his team, what could he have done in a Roush machine?

Ragan and teammate David Gilliland shoved and maneuvered their way past Matt Kenseth, who led the most laps of the race, and Carl Edwards, who had just slipped past Kenseth on the white-flag lap, to guide across the finish line in almost darkness because of a rain delay at the Alabama superspeedway. Ragan only led four of the 192 laps run, but that was enough to earn him over \$373,000 in first-place pay for the day.

It was the Unadilla driver's first win of the season. It fact it was the first time the No. 34, Front Row Motorsports Ford, has finished in the top-20 this year. "It's a true David vs. Goliath story. I couldn't be more proud to play my own role," Ragan said in the celebration following the victory.

David had Farm Rich frozen foods sponsoring him in Talladega, but there have been races where the team has gone without a sponsor.

Ragan's team owner, Bob Jenkins admits their operation doesn't have the sponsors or money of the Hendrick, Gibbs, Penske and Childress operations. "In the racing graveyard, my epitaph won't be I won the most races or championships, but I want to be known as a team that did the most with the least. Every year we try to get better. We work within ourselves. The chassis we run we build, so we're not able to go out and buy products from other teams, and that's a disadvantage, but on a day like today it really makes you feel good because you know the equipment that you won the race with was what you built in your own shop. That's what makes it so gratifying is to see these guys -- they make less than what a top-tier team would make, but they're still at the shop doing the same thing every day, and it paid off for them today. For me I'd much rather do it this way than to go out and write a check for top-tier equipment."



said Jenkins following the race.

David couldn't have made the home folks prouder. As he jumped into a wild celebration with his car-owner and crew, he wasted no time in thanking God when the reporter reached him with the microphone. "Not only was someone watching over us on those last couple laps, but just the whole day today, the fans that stuck it out, the NASCAR officials, the corner workers, the Air Titan and jet dryer drivers, just everybody that made this day possible. It probably wasn't meant to be, but everyone had their hearts set on completing 500 miles here at Talladega. So it was special to do that, and we were in a position to give God the glory, and I'm thankful for that," said Ragan.

For new arrivals to our area it is important to point out that many of us have watched David grow up. He was racing as a kid in the Legend's series at local tracks and advanced through stock cars and ARCA cars before landing the job with Jack Roush in the No. 6 Ford. David claimed a win for Roush in the July Daytona race in 2011, before leaving Roush at the end of that season.

The Talladega race was Ragan's 228th Sprint Cup event since 2006. Along with his two wins, Ragan had registered 14 top-five and 33 top-ten finishes in the top NASCAR division and has earned over \$27,000,000 in prize money over the past seven years.

Ragan will be in Georgia helping raise money for the Bald Ridge Lodge for teens on May 28th. David will be among the guest at the annual fundraising golf event for the lodge at Polo Golf and Country Club in Cumming. More information is available by telephoning 770-887-1220 or visiting the website www.baldridge.org.

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