

I've been hearing it all week long, "The Chase is already over." Really, it is? Wow, is everybody honestly that convinced Jimmie Johnson is just going to run away with this thing? Did anyone consult the other 11 drivers about this?

I realize how we are trained to think after the past three years. Once the 48 team gets out front, it really is over. But I'm not so convinced that is the case with the Chase of 2009. While history may tell us differently, I think this story is far from written just two races in. In fact, I think this might be the most competitive Chase yet.

You have the storied run of Mark Martin (who by the way is still the championship leader, even though many have anointed Johnson as champ), plus the ultra fiery Juan Montoya is still within striking distance. So don't give up on the 2009 Chase ... it is indeed not over.

TIER ONE

Mark Martin (No change)

Mark Martin did not have a second-place car at Dover. But what do championship teams do? They finish better than where they ran during the race and that's exactly what the No. 5 team did last Sunday.

It's hard to believe that Martin has finished first and second in the first two Chase races and has lost part of his championship lead! That's just how good the competition is in the Chase this year. Martin should be terrific at Kansas this week.

Remember his dominant win at Chicagoland in July? Martin led 195 laps and won at the identical twin race track to Kansas. During the race Martin was effusive, calling his car "the best car he had ever sat in." Pretty high praise from old man Martin. So which car is Martin racing this weekend? You got it. Crew chief Alan Gustafson is bringing the Chicago winner to Kansas. Mark Martin is my overall race favorite for the weekend.

Jimmie Johnson (No Change)

As predicted right here, Jimmie Johnson showed his Dover dominance once again last Sunday. We talked about how the tire test in August was an advantage for Johnson and Juan Montoya ... boy did that ever show last Sunday. Yes, championship "switch" is definitely on at the 48 shop.

Here's a story that will be repeated throughout the 2009 Chase ... now we head to a track where Johnson won this race last year. So, of course, most race fans are predicting that Johnson will run away with it once again. While I think Johnson will be good, no doubt, I think his teammate Mark Martin will be slightly better.

Johnson has been strong at the intermediate tracks this year, leading laps and running consistently in the top five but something always seems to happen to the No. 48 on the last few runs of a race this year, specifically at these intermediate tracks. "Something happening" has meant everything from handling, to parts breaking, to fuel mileage.

But check out these amazing numbers. At the tracks that fall into this category (California, Las Vegas, Atlanta, Texas, Charlotte, Michigan and Chicago ... nine races all told so far in 2009) Johnson has led an incredible 538 laps and has exactly ... one

top-five (that was his second at Texas where he only led one lap) and no wins to show for it.

Now for the big question, do I expect that trend to continue? With the No. 48 team in "championship mode" there is a good chance it will not. But even Chad Knaus will tell you, if you look at a nine-race average, there's something there. Should be very interesting to see what happens to the No. 48 team this weekend.

Juan Montoya (No change)

Remember back to the beginning of the Chase when we talked about Juan Montoya needing to "survive" the first few races of the Chase? So much for that! Montoya has thrived in the first two races with top-fives at two tracks where he had never finished in the top five before. If you still don't believe Montoya is a threat to win the title you should reconsider.

Montoya is now coming to his tracks of strength in the Chase ... Kansas, California and Charlotte all fit Montoya's style. Also for the third consecutive race in the Chase, crew chief Brian Pattie has decided to bring a brand new car to Kansas. At first I thought a new car for the first two Chase races was a risky move but whatever they are building at the Earnhardt Ganassi shop, keep it coming because the strategy has worked. Throw out all of the preconceived notions and past stats, JPM should prove to be a championship threat all the way to Homestead.

Denny Hamlin (No change)

We talked last week about Dover being a survival race for Denny Hamlin. In many respects, finishing 22nd was good for the No. 11 team. Despite the fact that it was their first finish out of the top 10 since Indy in August, it was their best finish at Dover in two years. We said Hamlin had to be within 100 points of the lead after Dover, 108 ... close enough. So we will keep Hamlin in the top tier because, just like Montoya, Hamlin is coming up to his best tracks in the Chase.

Hamlin has never finished in the top 10 at Kansas but lately this has been his type of track. The converse of the No. 48 team, since Michigan in June the No. 11 team has not finished outside of the top 10 at an intermediate race track, including Chicago, where they finished fifth. In a late audible, Mike Ford is also bringing what they called the best car ever built at JGR, the car Hamlin debuted at New Hampshire and finished second. Next week Hamlin will bring the Richmond winning car to California. I like the car rotation right now for the No. 11 team.

My only concern with Hamlin is that he stays in the game mentally. Last week at Dover, Hamlin was upset about the tire selection and honestly let that bother him much longer than it should have. Bottom line, his disappointment about the tire is not going to change the tire for the weekend, so move on. Also his "disagreement" with Brad Kesolowski in the Nationwide race. You can't let stuff like that get to you when you are trying to run for championship in the big money series. I still feel the best is yet to come for the No. 11 team in the Chase but everyone, especially the driver, must remain focused on the big prize and not let the little distractions get in the way.

Tony Stewart (No change)

Tony Stewart said this week, "It's not time to panic. When you panic and try to force things, that's when you make things worse for yourself." Stewart has 106 points to make up in eight races. That's plenty of space and time for Stewart to make a move

but it needs to happen quickly, these next three races for the No. 14 team are critical.

Stewart has been hit or miss at the intermediate race tracks this season and in order to make a run at the championship they will need to be much better. This weekend at Kansas, Stewart should be strong. He finished fourth at Chicago back in July and he has five top-10s in his eight Kansas races. So they have "hit it" more times than not at this type of track. The "miss it" part might come into play the two races after this. For some reason the California and Charlotte type tracks have given this No. 14 team fits. This is a critical stretch of the Chase for Smoke.

Brian Vickers (No Change)

Brian Vickers' rent in this space is good for one more week. That's how short the leash is for the No. 83 team. Vickers and the whole NASCAR world knew he had to survive the first two races of the Chase and so far he deserve a C+ grade. When the Chase started our magic number for Vickers was to be 100 or less points behind after Dover. They knew New Hampshire and Dover would be tough for them but falling 151 points behind may be too difficult to overcome. No doubt the intermediate tracks are where we expect this No. 83 team to pour it on. The top-fives must start rolling in starting this week or any hopes for a title might be dwindling.

TIER THREE

Jeff Gordon (-1)

It might be a week too early to move the four-time champion down one tier but things just do not seem to be clicking at the No. 24 camp. Certainly not enough so far to have a legit shot at the title. As we talked about before the Chase started, something just always seems to be missing late in the race for the No. 24 team. That has proven out at both New Hampshire and Dover, where Gordon fell out of the top five late in both races to finish 15th and sixth, respectively. That's not going to win a championship.

The good news, however, might just be around the corner for the team because these intermediate tracks are no doubt where Gordon has shined this year. In those nine races so far in 2009, Gordon has one win, five second-place finishes and he has only finished out of the top 10 once, that's impressive ... and kind of the opposite of his teammate Jimmie Johnson. If there are title hopes in 2009 for Four Time, it will be won with strong runs and some wins in the next few races.

Kurt Busch (+1)

Speaking of jumping on things a week too early, I may have done that last week to Kurt Busch by moving him down to tier four last week. As expected, Busch ran well at Dover, leading the second most laps and finishing fifth. But the next few races will determine Busch's championship possibilities. Kansas has never been a good track for Busch, with just two top-10 finishes. California has been hot and cold and Charlotte has traditionally been one of his worst tracks. Throw Martinsville in next and this is by far the most difficult stretch the No. 2 team will face in the Chase. Busch is in a very favorable championship position, just 75 points out in fourth but two of his best Chase tracks are now behind him and four of his biggest challenges in the Chase are directly ahead.

Ryan Newman (+1)

Making up 110 points for some might seem like a doable task. To make up 110 points for Newman and his team, though, might be a tough challenge. All Newman did last week at Dover was score his fifth consecutive top-10 finish, their consistency has been incredible. But sadly for the No. 39 team, the days of averaging an 8.3 finish in the Chase and winning a championship are gone. To make up 110 points, you have to possess the ability to win more than a race or two in the final eight of the season. I just don't see that happening for the No. 39 team. But like we pointed out last week, this team is still sneaky and could very well wind up in the top five when it is all over with at Homestead.

TIER FOUR

Greg Biffle (-1)

Dover was no doubt a disappointment for Biffle and his crew. You can't go to one of your best tracks, finish 13th (your first finish out of the top 10 at that track in four years) and expect to win a championship ... it's just not going to happen. Kansas though, might be Biffle's last shot to build some momentum. Biffle has finished first, second or third in four of his last five Kansas races. So the possibility still exists for this team, they must simply take advantage of race tracks where they run well.

Carl Edwards (-1)

See the above and then some. Where is the 2008 Carl Edwards? Yes the same one that made the daring wall-scraping-can-only-really-do-this-in-a-video-game move one year ago this week in trying to pass Jimmie Johnson for the win at Kansas on the last lap. Sadly, that team is nowhere to be found. The 2009 Carl Edwards is STRUGGLING. Just like his teammate Biffle, when Carl Edwards goes to Dover and cannot run in the top 10 and finishes 11th, you know it's not his year and guess what ... it's just not his year. The No. 99 team has now gone five consecutive races without a top-10, their longest top-10 drought of the season. They sure picked a bad time to have that happen.

Kasey Kahne (+1)

Dover was a strong race for the No. 9 team as expected and things may be a little brighter this week with Kansas on the horizon. The intermediate tracks have been a strong suit for the No. 9 team and Kahne throughout his career. Kahne finished third at Chicago and will be bringing that same car to Kansas. Still, there are too many distractions and too many points to make up for the team to be serious championship contenders. But if Kahne is going to make up some ground and get out of the Chase cellar, the next three races are his chance to do so.