

SPORTS



Jeff Birchfield

Chase brings out some of the worst in NASCAR

Longtime NASCAR fans will remember the term: stroking. Under the old Cup Series point standings, it was usually associated with the final race or two of the season when a driver leading the points would be looking at where he needed to finish a race to clinch the championship instead of going for the win. Most fans had little problem with it as the reward far outweighed the risk.

They do have a problem, however, with what Joe Gibbs Racing did Sunday at Talladega.

The JGR teams of Kyle Busch, Carl Edwards and Matt Kenseth weren't stroking. What they did was downright embarrassing.

We've seen the strategy at the restrictor-plate track where drivers ride near the back of the pack until near the end of the race and then charge to the front.

But those three teams never attempted to move to the front. Instead, they stayed near the back and finished 28th through 30th.

They made the argument it was no different than in the past, and they advanced to the next round of the Chase of the Sprint Cup playoffs with their actions.

But it sure didn't feel the same as Bill Elliott or Rusty Wallace trying to wrap up the championship at Atlanta in the old days.

The actions on Sunday went against the actual definition of the sport. At the end of the day, it's called automobile racing and there sure wasn't much racing those three drivers did.

What makes it seem worse is how dominant the Toyotas have been, the reputation of coach Gibbs as the ultimate competitor as well as the three extremely talented drivers.

Once you count in Denny Hamlin, who did race his way into the Chase in an exciting battle with Austin Dillon, the Gibbs team easily has the best driver lineup in NASCAR.

There isn't a driver in the planet in any form of racing I feel is as talented as Busch, while Hamlin and Edwards are easily the best two drivers in the sport without a championship.

At age 44, Kenseth is still one of the top drivers in the sport.

But the deal on Sunday reminded me of some of the garbage we see in other sports. Instead of stroking, it felt more like teams tanking games at the end of the season to get high draft choices or sitting the starting quarterback as they're about to enter the playoffs.

So what is the solution? The Gibbs team makes a valid point. If they had got caught up in the "big one" at Talladega, they might have been knocked out of championship contention.

I've long advocated for bonus points for leading a certain number of laps. It would be something like a bonus point for every five laps you lead at a track 2-miles or longer, every seven laps you lead at an intermediate track and every 10 at a short track.

That way, it actually pays to be up front instead of riding in the back.

Other than that, it is unfortunately the nature of racing at the restrictor-plate tracks. With Talladega being part of the Chase for the foreseeable future, it's an ugly scenario that will likely show up again.

On the flip side, Talladega did provide the drama of Hamlin and Dillon tied in the points at the end of the race. Hamlin won the tiebreaker and that's the kind of close competition that any sport longs for.

You also had Joey Logano

See NOTES, Page 5B

Class 4A landscape changes drastically

By DOUGLAS FEITZ
Press Staff Writer
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Elizabethton's move to Class 4A in football looks quite different now.

The Cyclones were slotted in Class 3A when the TSSAA released its classification assignments for the 2017-21 school years, but Elizabethton exercised its option to move up to Class 4A mainly because of the different schedule



it would create. However, things changed dramatically on Tuesday. Previously the Class 4A ranks not only included Greenville, but also perennial state powers Knox Fulton and Knox Catholic. However, Catholic was slotted in Class 5A while Fulton announced Tuesday it was moving to Class 5A. Alcoa, another perennial state

power, had floated the idea of moving to Class 4A. However, with the defection of several Class 4A schools to Class 5A — Gibbs Seymour and Carter — Alcoa opted to remain in Class 3A.

"Programs come and go, but really and truly the road has gone through Knoxville for us," said Elizabethton head coach Shaw Witten. "Now you don't see the Knoxville teams. Greenville kind of becomes that team, replacing Fulton and Catholic."

Any chance of reaching even the state semifinals looked troublesome for area teams like Elizabethton, Sullivan East and Sullivan South if they had to face Fulton followed by Greenville or vice versa in any of the next four years. And Greenville's potential postseason road certainly got a lot smoother.

Witten said it's OK to look at the big picture.

See CLASS 4A, Page 3B



Milligan's 6-foot-8 Will Buckner is likely the Buffs' top scoring option this year.

Bigger Buffs

Plenty of unknowns, lots of possibilities for Milligan

By DAVE O'NEIL
Press Staff Writer
dovoneil@johnsoncitypress.com

With the regular season getting set to start on Thursday, there is still a lot Milligan men's basketball coach Bill Robinson doesn't know about his basketball team.

He isn't sure who will step up and take the big shot with time winding down. He isn't sure who will emerge as the starting point guard. He also doesn't know who will take over the leadership duties on an inexperienced team dominated by sophomores and juniors.

But amid the uncertainty lies a certain amount of exhilara-

tion for Robinson and his staff heading into Thursday's season-opening road game at the University of the Cumberlands. The young Buffs have length, quickness and a tremendous amount of upside.

"It's a bigger squad than we've had in a long time, and we even have some guys that we thought were post players when they came in that we may be able to slide over to the perimeter and play bigger," Robinson said. "It's exciting to see how many different combinations we can put together."

There are certainly plenty of possibilities for Robinson to consider when he puts a lineup on the floor but it appears most

of the variation will occur on the perimeter in the paint. Will Buckner and Jacob Cawood seem to have the market cornered on the starting jobs at center and power forward, respectively.

Buckner, a 6-foot-8 sophomore, saw plenty of time a year ago and will likely be Milligan's top scoring option this season. Cawood, a 6-6 sophomore, is a blue-collar player who Robinson expects to provide some toughness in the paint.

"Those guys are best of friends," Robinson said. "Cawood is our tough, hard-nosed defender. He does all the

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Tennessee at South Carolina

Saturday, 7:15 p.m. (ESPN2)

Vols consider South Carolina a rivalry game

By RHIANNON POTNEY
Knoxville News Sentinel

It's not among the programs often referenced as a rivalry, but the Tennessee football players would put South Carolina in that category.

No. 18 Tennessee (5-2, 2-2 SEC) plays South Carolina (3-4, 1-4) on Saturday (TV: ESPN2, 7:15 p.m. EDT) at Williams-Brice Stadium in Columbia, S.C. Although the Vols are favored by nearly two touchdowns, the last four games in the series have been decided by a total of 11 points.

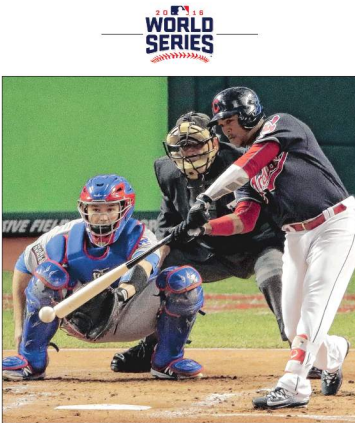
"We look at this kind of like a rivalry game so you know rivalry games are supposed to be close," Tennessee junior defensive lineman Kendall Vickers said on Tuesday afternoon at the Ray and Lucy Hand Digital Studio. "But we just have to go in with the mindset we just have to work this week and just go out there and execute, just like Florida and Georgia those close game seems like every year comes down the wire. The team that executes the best at the end of the game will win."

Tennessee recovered a fumble in the final minute to secure a 27-24 victory over South Carolina last season.

"I think it's a rivalry game. South Carolina and Tennessee have gone down to the wire almost every year, even before I got here," Tennessee junior safety Todd Kelly Jr. said. "I remember watching the game and you know it's pretty special. Marquez North's one-handed catch the last-second field goal, so it's going to come down to the wire most likely because they are a great team and we are coming in to play our A game."

Playing the Gamecocks in South Carolina gives the Vols a heightened sense of upset awareness.

"You have to be careful about every single game, especially in the SEC — especially when you are on the road in the SEC as well," Tennessee senior quarterback Joshua Dobbs said. "You have to bring your A game if you are going to go into someone else's house and come out with a W. We understand that. We are going to get their best shot."



Cleveland's Jose Ramirez hit an RBI single in the first inning of Game 1 of the World Series Tuesday night against the Chicago Cubs. The Indians led 3-0 after six innings. More details on the World Series is available at JohnsonCityPress.com. Wednesday's Game 2 was moved up to a 7 p.m. start due to possible inclement weather.



ETSU players celebrate Joe Pickering's (18) goal.

Bucs top UNCG

Win assures ETSU bye in SoCon tourney

By Joe Aveneto
Press Staff Writer
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With a chance to earn some time off, the East Tennessee State University soccer team closed out its home schedule in style.

Now the Bucs are going for a conference championship. Joe Pickering scored in the 31st minute and ETSU held on for a 1-0 victory over UNC Greensboro on Tuesday night at

Summers-Taylor Stadium. The victory assured the Bucs of one of the top two spots in the Southern Conference's final standings. They'll have a bye in the quarterfinals of the league tournament.

ETSU closes the regular season Saturday at Mercer with the winner claiming the conference regular-season title.

That was the plan, to make sure we secure second

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SPORTS

FOOTBALL

NFL standings table with columns for conference, team, wins, losses, ties, points for, points against.

SPORTS WAVES

Television
GOLF
11 p.m. on GOLFTV: PGA, WGC-HSBC Champions
7 p.m. on FOX: Chicago Cubs at Cleveland

BASEBALL

World Series results
WORLD SERIES
Game 1 (Wednesday)
All games televised by Fox

CALENDAR

Baseball
WISCONSIN COLLEGE
Nov. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31

BRIEFLY

ETSU athletes, Youth finish in top 20
Freshman Anika Kedlaya and sophomore Loy Lee Ying finished tied for 19th individually after the three-day tournament in Kiawah Island, S.C.

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James leads Cavs' rout

Cleveland raises championship banner before opener

The Associated Press
CLEVELAND — LeBron James had his 43rd career triple-double. Kyrie Irving scored 29 points and the Cleveland Cavaliers, who raised their championship banner before the game, beat the New York Knicks 117-88 on Tuesday night in the NBA season opener.

James scored 19 points and added 11 rebounds and 14 assists in front of a raucous home crowd that was on its feet from the pregame ceremony until late in the game, celebrating the city's first championship in 52 years.

James, who spoke to the crowd before the game, continued his perfect record on ring nights. He was 20 when the Miami Heat players were presented with their championship rings.

Irving scored 19 points in the third quarter, when Cleveland used a 20-4 run to take a 74-53 lead. Kevin

Love scored 23 for the Cavaliers. Carmelo Anthony led New York with 19 points and Derrick Rose had 17.

Cavaliers guard Iman Shumpert was taken to the locker room late in the game with concussion-like symptoms after colliding with Kristaps Porzingis.

Cleveland's players, coaching staff and front office personnel also received their championship rings in the pregame ceremony.

The basketball game was only part of a big night in town. The Cleveland Indians played Game 1 of the World Series against the Chicago Cubs across the street at Progressive Field.

The Knicks, who missed the playoffs the last three seasons, are expecting major improvement after acquiring Rose from Chicago to run the offense and signing center Joakim Noah, who was

scoreless in 21 minutes.

New York, playing its first game under new coach Jeff Hornacek, trailed by 13 in the second quarter but called to cut the lead to 5-4 at halftime. A pair of dunks by James and 3-pointers from Irving and Love pushed the lead to 61-49.

Cleveland's spurt continued as Irving hit three 3-pointers for a 74-53 lead.

Porzingis scored 16 points for New York.

TIP-INS
 Knicks: Anthony scored 11 of New York's 18 first-quarter points.
 ... PG Brandon Jennings, signed in the offseason, scored seven points in 22 minutes.
 Cavaliers: F Tristan Thompson was scoreless and had six rebounds in 21 minutes. ... Rookie G Kyrie Felder is going through concussion protocol after being injured in practice last week.



LeBron James accepts his NBA championship ring from Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert prior to Tuesday's game.

Epstein on verge of turning baseball world upside-down

COMMENTARY
 By Jim Litke
 AP Sports Columnist

CHICAGO — Theo Epstein is restless in a way most of us are not.

No one is more invested in finding out whether he can repeat in Chicago what he did in Boston a dozen years ago — win a World Series in a town that measures its disappointment in decades.

But it's not just the short-term goal that commands Epstein's attention. In the middle of a vacation with family or the middle of an inning surrounded by staff — sometimes even in mid-air — Epstein will extricate himself from the group, pull out his mobile phone and laser-focus on the longer-term target: building a dynasty.

That's why no box has gone unchecked. It's why Epstein spent days poring over blueprints for sectional sofas to furnish the Cubs' luxurious new clubhouse, but also why he spent five years tracking the ups and downs of a former Red Sox prospect named Anthony Rizzo, then traded for him when the time — not to mention the price — was right.

"We've made plenty of mistakes," Epstein said on the field at Wrigley hours before the Cubs beat the Dodgers to wrap the



Cubs owner Tom Ricketts holds up the NLCS trophy as Theo Epstein stands by him at Chicago's win Game 6 to reach the World Series for the first time in 71 years.

NLCS last week. "But the ones that we've hit on, we've gotten lucky with; some impact guys back, some best-case scenarios as far as how the guys have turned out."

"We knew," he added a moment later, "that we didn't have a chance to rebuild twice in a market like this."

When Epstein came on board with the Cubs in 2011, his task was to turn around an aircraft carrier-sized organization. He put back together his sabermetric-styled brand from earlier stints in San Diego and Boston — front-office execs Jed Hoyer and Jason McLeod — and rolled up his

sleeves.

During the first phase, he set out to shed what was essentially a roster of bad contracts and spare parts, then went searching for difference-makers largely through the draft. Cub fans, meanwhile, struggled to see what difference all that attention to data and detail made.

The team lost 101 games in Epstein's first season on the job, then 96 and 89. But in 2015 with manager Joe Maddon and a roster stocked with promising young talent and a few savvy veterans, it became clear the rebuild had paid off.

Rizzo was a budding star at first base. Across the diamond was draft choice and soon-to-be Rookie of the Year Kris Bryant. Up the middle, Addison Russell locked down the starting shortstop job at 21, and Javier Baez began realizing his offensive promise.

Behind them in center was Dexter Fowler, who hit for more power than ever before.

Despite his reputation as a numbers guy, one factor in many of Epstein's trade and draft decisions was actually a hunch. He prioritized hitters with power instead of pitching, betting that one little unexpected consequence of baseball's toughened-up drug policy would be a dearth of the former and a surplus of the latter. This season made him look like a genius.

It didn't hurt, of course, that pitching coach Chris Bosio turned pitchers Kyle Hendricks and Jake Arrieta from afterthoughts into tough-as-nails, front-of-the-rotation starters. Or that Epstein was given a Monopoly-money checkbook to aid expensive complementary parts like veteran pitchers Jon Lester and John Lackey, and switch-hitting, infielder-outfielder Ben Zobrist, whom Maddon uses like a Swiss Army knife.

None of this comes as a surprise to Cleveland manager Terry Francona, who had the same job in Boston when Epstein, only 31 and still regarded as a wunderkind, rebuilt the franchise and reversed his first "curse." He'd seen him at work before. He knew how much the infighting in the wake of all that success in Boston had stung Epstein.

"I saw him in spring training when we played them. He made a point of coming down actually during the game. And we text every so often," Francona said on the eve of the Series. "Something comes up or something happens that he thinks is funny, or jogs a memory. We've texted back and forth during the last couple playoff series. We were together eight years."

"Eight years in Boston is, I would almost say miraculous. There's a lot of fond memories

and we got through some tough times together and came out in the end. I knew when things got tough," he said, "where I could go."

That kind of loyalty and toughness impressed itself on Maddon when he interviewed for the Red Sox job that Francona — who had much more experience at the time — wound up getting. What he's learned about Epstein since made him even a bigger admirer.

"When he scans the clubhouse and sees the team his boss has assembled, Maddon marvels that there's not a prima donna in sight. Just like the coach and the ottoman he plops down on occasionally, Epstein has covered every detail ahead of time. Not just the new-age business tools like NASA-caliber scouting reports, but the old-school nod to issues like personalities and character."

"I think sometimes in the game today, it gets to the point where it's just about acquiring a number," Maddon said. "I'm a big believer in that, but I also like the balance between the person and what the back of his baseball card says. Our guys do a wonderful job of balancing the math with the actual person."

Thank Theo's restlessness for that. Four more wins and generations of Cub fans will be doing the same.

BUFFS

Continued from Page 1B

dirty work, and we're really going to rely on Buckner to be a main scorer for us."

On the perimeter, Sullivan East product David Cassidy will be relied upon to provide leadership and scoring. After he returns from a foot injury that's expected to keep him out of the mix for two weeks or so, Cassidy closed last season on a high note, knocking down eight 3-pointers in the regular-season finale against Bryan.

Alex Biggerstaff, a 6-5 senior guard, is also a guy who could play a big role this season. Biggerstaff played sparingly last year after transferring in from UNC-Asheville. Tyler Fulknerberry, a 6-4 freshman, could also be a major factor at the wing spot thanks to a deft touch from beyond the arc. The

freshman from Mt. Juliet scored 11 points in nine minutes during Milligan's exhibition game on Monday night.

"He's just a knock-down shooter," Robinson said. "He can't do a whole lot else right now, but he can definitely shoot the basketball."

Aaron Levarity is a player Robinson has been particularly intrigued by due to his length. At 6-7, the newcomer from the Bahamas can play the wing or the small forward position and has the ability to knock down the 3 or use his size to slash to the basket.

Early on, Robinson evasions the all-important guard position. He handles that as a committee of players with wide-ranging skill sets. Cole Anderson, a 5-10 sophomore, started some during the second half of last season, making him

the incumbent. Robinson said Anderson knows the position well and is a traditional pass-first point guard.

Daxton Bostian, a 5-10 freshman, has the potential to eventually take over the reins of the offense, but he'll start the season as Anderson's backup. Bostian and Anderson have similar builds, but Bostian has proven himself to be more of a scorer.

The most interesting option at point is freshman Mike Featherston. The 6-6 guard is an excellent passer with the potential to allow the Buffs to put a huge lineup on the floor.

"When he's in the game, he wants the ball in his hands just to make passes and get other people involved," Robinson said. "We could actually play him at point and go with a really big lineup. We could

pretty much go 6-5 across the board and bigger if we wanted to put a big lineup on the floor and not really lose a lot in terms of positioning."

Robinson has also been impressed thus far with a pair of freshmen from Elizabethton, So Pless, who played inside for the Cyclones, is as strong to life on the perimeter while Nichols has also done some good things so far in practice.

"Both those kids are playing pretty well," Robinson said. "They're both long and athletic. It's nice to be able to get some of those local kids who can come in and make an impact for you."

Milligan's game on Thursday is slated to tip off at 7 p.m. The Buffs will play at home for the first time on Nov. 3 against Alice Lloyd College.

CLASS 4A

Continued from Page 1B

"You look at what Greeneville has done, winning two state championships," said Witten. "The good programs up here see the big picture and the opportunity. You look at our girls basketball team making it to the state tournament so many years, and winning it. The ultimate goal is to go as far as you can."

Area schools could face scheduling problems as only eight teams could be in Class 4A, from Elizabethton to Anderson County. It could create one big far-reaching region, or two very small ones.

Here are the teams from Northeast Tennessee through Knoxville remaining in Class 4A: Elizabethton, Sullivan East, Sullivan South, Sullivan Central, Greeneville, Grainger, Union County and Anderson County. One caveat is Union County petitioning the TSSAA to drop its football program. If that happens, Anderson County might move into a Southeast Tennessee region.

It is possible some Class 3A teams in East Tennessee could choose to move up to 4A, but it seems unlikely with potential scheduling problems.

One thing that seems certain is the Class 4A playground will be exactly that. Long

trips will be very likely even in the first round as Region 2 will almost surely expand down to Chattanooga and/or out to Crossville.

"It could be painful for a team, having to make that kind of trip two weeks in a row," said Witten.

South athletic director Anthony Richardson said his school will just take things in stride.

"You wish you could control things, but they're going to do whatever they're going to do," Richardson said. "It's out of our hands, and we will go with what they decide."

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