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Neil's Corner



Last time we chatted I started by noting that when it mattered most, James Courtney stood up in the saddle and won the Sunday race (Race 24) at Sandown.

As it turned out, that victory was vital. In fact, it turned the tide.

I also noted that while I admired both young blokes, Jamie and James, for their brilliant seasons, I confessed that I would be pleased to see James win it. Now here's the rest of the confession.... At the time of writing, I didn't think he could do it and I quietly mentioned that to a few people close to me.

The reason? The well-publicized ownership dramas at Dick Johnson Racing had been in the public domain since Bathurst and slowly but surely the points cushion that James enjoyed was being eroded.

Counter that with the Team Vodafone juggernaut, the experienced and reigning Champions bearing down, I had a feeling James might get nipped at the post as it were...

I was wrong! And pleased to be wrong...

I think it was good for the Series that another new bloke grabbed the gold. Good for Ford fans. Good for an older, well established Team to bounce back at win after all these years.

On that subject. Dick Johnson has rescued the Team from certain disaster. A new equity partner (the Crimsafe organization) has replaced Charlie Schwerkolt's share and they will be on the grid in 2011 with 2 cars. Steven Johnson for sure and AN other in the second seat.

James is a goner, he's turning red it seems and his Sporting Director, Adrian Burgess is turning even "redder" and heading to Team Vodafone.

The Sydney Telstra 500 was an amazing event... I cannot recall a battle so intense threading right across the weekend.

Friends, relatives, neighbours have all told me they enjoyed the show. Even those who don't care for motorsport.

Saturday's downpour kicked it at just the right/wrong (delete as required depending on who you are in this circus) time.

It made an extraordinary spectacle. The Top 3 Championship contenders all fell into the concrete. In fact, 14 cars, or almost 50% of the field failed to finish.

Then, in a fairytale outcome, a young bloke, Jonathon Webb, captured his maiden victory by playing the smart card and putting wet tyres on for wet weather.... Seemed elementary to us in the booth.

Actually a quick back room story. My former Race Engineer, (& Skaife's too) Ross Holder, is our consultant engineer and tactician in the box. He's a very clever man and has been by our side since Seven won the V8 Supercar broadcast rights deal.

He knew, and we all knew, the key runners were trying to get to Lap 51 of 74 in order to get into the next fuel window. Decoded, this simply means they needed to put up with the wet conditions on the wrong tyre in order make it to the point where they only had to refuel one more time to get home.

Knowing how dangerous and uncontrollable the cars are in the heavy wet on slick tyres - I was suggesting well in advance that the lap tops should be thrown away and the Teams needed to listen to their drivers.

In the ad breaks and behind the scenes, Skaife, Ross and I were having an almighty brawl debating this point. MS was in total agreement with me. It was Ross at the peak of his angry best as we taunted him about "bloody engineers" and their software verses reality...

If we had a camera for that one - it would have been good viewing! ;-)

Ross is now living in Thailand and has taken on a huge engineering role for a company over there. He's not going to be a part of our show in future and we'll miss him enormously, personally and professionally.

The point was, had one of the key runners come in, they would have all taken the cue and followed. It was a case of who was going to blink first!

I found it all a bit dopey. One of them might well have wrapped up the Championship if they got onto wets and won the race like Webb did.... Instead they all smashed their cars but it made for a fascinating Sunday.

Make no mistake, it was far from over on Saturday night, despite Courtney earning 60 points by getting the car across the line to finish the race in 15th.

The nail biting went all the way to Sunday and the last lap. Whincup needed to finish 4th or better and if JC stumbled, then Jamie would be three-time Champion.

Whincup only got to 5th and James fell over the line 14th after a troubled race and several close calls!

As I said 65 pts was the margin. Discount the 60 earned on the saturday in the chaos and we're talking only 5pts between them after 26 races.

Now you begin to grasp just how vital the Sunday at Sandown was for James...

Finally, I stumbled onto something neat in the Sydney press. This was the editorial column written in Sydney's Daily Telegraph on the Monday after the race.

Blokes like me gushing about the sport really means nothing - when a major daily newspaper says such positive things about our sport then I feel we should all feel proud...

Merry Christmas everybody and have a super safe holiday period and happy, healthy 2011.



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