

RACING

Earnhardt's future at DEI in limbo after comments

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s battle with his stepmother heated up Monday when NASCAR's most popular driver said his future with the family company could hinge on their rocky relationship.



EARNHARDT

The latest issue centers around comments Teresa Earnhardt made almost a month ago when she publicly questioned Junior's commitment to winning.

"Right now the ball's in his court to decide on whether he wants to be a NASCAR driver or whether he wants to be a public personality," she said in a story in the *The Wall Street Journal*.

Earnhardt had initially refused to respond to the remark, which stirred up a frenzy in a NASCAR community all too aware that his contract with Dale Earnhardt Inc. expires at the end of this season.

But as the first session of pre-season testing opened Monday at Daytona (Fla.) International Speedway, the driver made it clear that the comments stung.

"I was trying not to get involved in it, (but) I really didn't appreciate it," he said. "Whether she was taken out of context or not, I just didn't really appreciate it."

FOOTBALL

NEW ORLEANS

Payton named top coach

New Orleans Saints coach Sean Payton was named NFL Coach of the Year by *The Associated Press* on Monday.

In Payton's first season in New Orleans, the Saints (10-6) improved their victory total by seven en route to securing the second seed in the NFC playoffs.

Eric Mangini of the New York Jets, another first-year head coach, got three votes. San Diego's Marty Schottenheimer, the 2004 winner, received two. Jeff Fisher of Tennessee got one.

ATLANTA

Georgia Tech star leaving

Georgia Tech wide receiver Calvin Johnson announced Monday that he will enter the NFL draft, giving up his final college season for the chance to be one of the top players selected.

Johnson had nine catches for 186 yards and two touchdowns in a 38-35 loss to West Virginia in the Gator Bowl. He finished with 76 receptions for 1,202 yards and 15 touchdowns this season.

ANN ARBOR, Mich.

Branch opts for NFL

Alan Branch is skipping his senior season at Michigan to enter the NFL draft, delivering a blow to the Wolverines a week after they lost the Rose Bowl.

The 6-foot-6, 311-pound defensive tackle, a second-team All-American, is projected as a first-round pick in April's draft.

TENNIS

HOBART, Australia

Serena Williams ends long layoff with victory

Former top-ranked Serena Williams beat Sofia Arvidsson of Sweden 6-4, 6-0 in a first-round match at the Hobart International on Monday, ending a four-month injury layoff.

Williams, a seven-time Grand Slam singles champion, led 5-0 in the first set before allowing Arvidsson back into the match to 5-4, then easily won the final set. Despite four double-faults, Williams won in 55 minutes.

Ranked 95th and on the comeback from ankle and knee problems, Williams, who has not played since last year's U.S. Open, said her best was yet to come.

BASKETBALL

INDIANAPOLIS

Fever take veteran Sam in WNBA dispersal draft

The Indiana Fever selected veteran guard-forward Sheri Sam on Monday in a draft of players from the WNBA's disbanded Charlotte Sting.

The Fever took the 6-foot Sam, a 2002 All-Star, with the ninth pick in the dispersal draft.

Sam, who played on Seattle's 2004 WNBA championship team with Fever teammate Tully Bevilaqua, started 67 of 68 games with Charlotte the past two seasons.

The Sting, an original member of the WNBA, folded last week after 10 seasons.

Ravens' offense hopes to utilize balanced attack

BY DAVID GINSBURG
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

OWINGS MILLS, Md.

The Baltimore Ravens won a franchise-record 13 games this season because their offense provided sufficient support to the league's top-rated defense.

They hope to implement the same formula Saturday in their playoff game against the Indianapolis Colts.

After yielding at least 100 yards rushing in each of their 16 regular-season games, the Colts stacked the line of scrimmage Saturday in an effort to stop Kansas City Chiefs running back Larry Johnson.

The strategy worked perfectly: Johnson was limited to 32 yards on a season-low 13 carries, and the Colts advanced with a 23-8 victory.

Kansas City had few options after discovering Johnson would have no room to run. Forced to throw, Chiefs quarterback Trent Green went 14 of 24 for 107 yards with three turnovers.

The Ravens expect the Colts to implement a similar ploy Saturday against running back Jamal Lewis, who ran for 1,132 yards and is the focal point of the Baltimore attack. Lewis averaged 22 carries in the Ravens' final four regular-season games, all of them wins.

Just because the Colts stopped Johnson, that doesn't mean the Ravens won't attempt to pound Lewis into the line a couple dozen times, if for no other reason than to keep Colts quarterback Peyton Manning off the field.

But if Indianapolis stops Lewis, the Ravens won't panic. That's because they've got quarterback Steve McNair, who has done an excellent job this season distributing the ball to his receivers without any hint of favoritism.

Talking

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are confident of duplicating it against the host Ravens (13-3), who feature one of the league's top power rushers in Jamal Lewis.

"You lose, you go home. It's not time to go home," Colts cornerback Nick Harper said. "We've got a long ways to go. If it's meant for us to go to the Super Bowl, it's going to happen."

"But I know we're going to do everything in our power to get there."

Colts defenders also know, or at least suspect, that their side of the ball will again be given little chance of success by outside observers.

"We know everybody's going to trash our defense," Colts defensive end Raheem Brock said. "We know we can do it. It's playoff time. We're going to step it up."

"That's what happens in the playoffs." Safety Bob Sanders is equally confident.

"They've got good backs and a good quarterback, and it's going to be another big test for us," said Sanders, who had three tackles and an interception against the Chiefs. "We've just got to make sure we're prepared, study hard and come out and play hard."

But the challenge is significantly tougher than the Chiefs posed Saturday.

Led by Lewis and veteran quarterback Steve McNair, the Ravens feature a more versatile offense than the Chiefs. They also have significantly more playoff experience than the Chiefs, who had precious little.

McNair, for example, is a for-



AP PHOTO

Quarterback Steve McNair leads a balanced Baltimore Ravens offense that had three players catch at least 67 passes this season.

Todd Heap leads Baltimore with 73 catches, followed by Derrick Mason (68) and Mark Clayton (67). Rookie Demetrius Williams has chipped in with 22 receptions, and fullback Ovie Mughelli had 21.

So if the Colts stack eight men at the line, the Ravens will be happy to put the ball in the air.

"It's good to be versatile, to be able to run the ball and throw the ball," Clayton said, "and when we throw the ball, we have options. We know that Mason can get open, Demetrius can get open, Todd Heap is open and myself. So, that's really good for us."

The Ravens are 9-1 since coach Brian Billicek fired offensive coordinator Jim Fassel and started calling the plays. Lewis has received plenty of work, but McNair has done much more than simply hand off the football.

"It's a lot of guys taking pressure off each other," Heap said.

mer league MVP (he shared the honor with the Colts' Peyton Manning in 2003) who guided the Tennessee Titans to the Super Bowl in 1999. Wide receiver Derrick Mason, defensive back Samari Rolle and kicker Matt Stover also were on that squad.

Linebacker Ray Lewis was the MVP of Baltimore's 2001 Super Bowl championship team.

Of Baltimore's 53-man roster, 26 players have playoff experience.

"You've just got to make sure you prepare well and know exactly what they're going to do so you're not surprised by anything," Sanders said. "It's going to be a big test for us."

"As long as we do what we have to and play Colts ball, I don't see any reason why we can't win."

Neither does defensive tackle Anthony McFarland, who says the key to success is simple.

"Just tackle," he said. "When we play fast and we tackle the football, I like my chances. I really do. I like my chances. I've got the best quarterback in football."

"If we play fast and tackle the football, I'll put everything I've got on this team."

On a serious note, so will June.

"It's playoff time, and we have enough veteran guys on our team that's played enough football to know it's either win or go home," June said. "We just want to go out there and play with that same energy and just keep going, because (Saturday) is going to take more. It's going to take more for us to go out there and get the job done."

"It's really just about stepping up and doing it; it's not about changing this person or changing that person. It's just about you beat your man and get the job done."

Owner

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

on his father, the team owner. Irsay called his dad his own man and acknowledged he only learned of the impending move the morning the Colts left town.

Why did it happen? Irsay explains his late father didn't think the Colts could be competitive with an outdated stadium, and when the city refused to build a new one, it threatened to keep the Colts by using eminent domain, potentially stripping Robert Irsay of ownership.

From Jim Irsay's perspective, if the city or state made any effort to extend an olive branch, he believes his father would have kept the team in Baltimore. Instead, Robert Irsay wouldn't risk losing his team.

"I know he didn't want to move, but the business model was crumbling and his attorneys felt with the eminent domain threat, the city was going to move on the team," Jim Irsay said. "That's why there was a sudden move."

"There was so much fear on both sides."

The secondary role Irsay played in the ticket office and accounting department back then matters little to the fans of today. After all, he's still an Irsay.

The 47-year-old owner, who inherited the team from his late father a decade ago, hopes this weekend's reception will be more pleasant than his first trip back home in 1998. On that trip, Irsay remembers seeing a T-shirt with

Heat

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

man (Shawne Merriman) and five All-Pro.

And it's on Baltimore, which has a defense reminiscent of the stultifying 2000 NFL champions and an experienced, skilled and confident offensive leader in Steve McNair.

And, naturally, it's on the Patriots as they seek a fourth title in six years, equaling the amazing run by the 1970s Pittsburgh Steelers.

The Colts? Until they shut down Johnson with a defensive performance the Ravens would have bragged about, they were barely in the Super Bowl discussions.

"I think we have a very adaptable team and we play to the situation," coach Tony Dungy said. "I think we have an offense that can move the ball in a number of ways."

"Defensively, it's always better when you play with the lead, but that hasn't been the case. We haven't had a lot of big leads this year. I think we're

"I was always taught to pray for people who have that sort of weight still on them. If people want to harbor resentment, what can you do?"

Jim Irsay

Colts owner on Baltimore fans who still are angry at his family for moving the team to Indianapolis



an image of a Ravens fan urinating on his father's grave.

Indianapolis returned to Baltimore again in 2001 and lost 39-27 before finally winning 24-7 at Baltimore in the 2005 season opener. Saturday will be the Colts' first playoff game in Baltimore since 1977.

"I was always taught to pray for people who have that sort of weight still on them," Irsay said. "If people want to harbor resentment, what can you do?"

Over the years, some of the outrage has waned. The hate mail has basically stopped, Irsay said.

But some former players still shun their Colts legacy, choosing instead to stay with the Baltimore lineage.

And to fans, nothing is more enticing than beating the Colts. Even beating the dreaded Steelers or the Browns, who left Cleveland and moved to Baltimore in 1996 with the promise of a new stadium, pales in comparison to a win against Indy.

"That's important to a lot of people," quarterback Steve McNair said. "We know it's important to the fans."

It is, however, mostly a fan thing. The significance is virtually

going to be very well-prepared to go into Baltimore."

They had better be, because Ray Lewis, Ed Reed, Adalius Thomas, Bart Scott and Chris McAlister are primed for a championship pursuit.

But maybe the Colts are ready for this challenge and others.

Consider:

- Manning has not been at his best this season. Sure, he's excelled far more than he's bombed, but there have been instances, particularly Saturday against the Chiefs, when he wasn't the main reason Indianapolis won.

- The combination of Addai and Dominic Rhodes has ably replaced Edgerrin James, and Addai has more game-breaking potential than James.

- Marvin Harrison was a non-factor against the Chiefs, and Reggie Wayne was a supporting receiver. So Dallas Clark, the perfect antidote in the passing game to Baltimore's active linebackers, caught nine passes for 103 yards.

- With tear-your-head-off safety Bob Sanders back in the lineup, Indy's defense looked quite capable against Kansas City.

It will need a similar effort in Baltimore, but before the playoffs

lost on today's players, most of whom were small children, or not even born yet, when Irsay's father made his decision to leave town.

"I'd probably say that two-thirds of our players don't even know that we started in Baltimore," coach Tony Dungy said. "If you talk about Willie Mays or Jim Brown, they don't even know who those guys are."

Irsay, however, still carries fond memories from his Baltimore days.

He remembers going to training camp in Golden, Colo., in 1972, and being asked to move off the training table by John Unitas. He recalls the parties, the players, the celebrations, the disappointments and how his father groomed him to take over.

One of his daughters was born there, and he still has close friends in Baltimore.

Yet as much as Irsay hopes the city forgives, he realizes it may never forget.

"Having the name Irsay, some people will try to tie things into that, but all I can speak of is my legacy as an owner, which really began in 1998," Irsay said. "And the move was not part of my ownership legacy."

began, speculation centered on whether Johnson would rush for 200 yards at the RCA Dome. He got 32, and his team got 44.

"We have a good defense," said tackle Anthony McFarland, who played on a good one in Tampa Bay and won a championship.

"Regardless of what the critics say, if you go out and take it one play at a time and do your job, play fast and tackle, that's the kind of performance you can get."

Most significant, it's quite possible the Colts have learned from past failures, including going flat in the postseason after an early clinching of the division.

Dungy doesn't think there's an advantage to turning it on for the playoffs — he says it's not good strategy — but it was clear from their domination of Kansas City that the Colts have a better feel for the postseason this January.

Does that make them a potent threat to get to the big game, where any AFC representative should win?

This Saturday's matchup with the Ravens should answer that.

Barry Wilner covers the NFL for *The Associated Press*. Send comments to bwilner@ap.org.

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