

Big Ben bolsters Chicago

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some major moves in the offseason while keeping their young core of guards and forwards intact.

Chicago signed Wallace to a four-year, \$60 million contract and traded underachieving center Tyson Chandler to New Orleans for veteran forward P.J. Brown.

"We like our roster, but we don't know what we have yet," general manager John Paxson said. "There are still a lot of unknowns."

The biggest is this: How will the younger core respond to expectations that haven't been this high since two guys named Michael and Scottie were in uniform? The first hint comes Tuesday, when the Bulls open the season at Miami.

"If there is a downside to (the expectations), then we're not ready for it," coach Scott Skiles said. "We should have beaten Washington two years ago. We led the series, 2-0, and then lost it. We could have beaten Miami. We haven't had any real (postseason) success, but we've had the experience of it."

After helping the Pistons win a championship and reach four straight Eastern Conference finals, Wallace was fourth in the NBA last season in rebounding (11.3 per game), ninth in blocks (2.2) and 10th in steals (1.78), but he had a rough ending in Detroit.

Wallace reportedly did not get along with coach Flip Saunders and refused to enter a game. Now, he'll work with the more feisty Skiles, who had heated words with the Pistons last season.

Wallace shrugged that off and compared Skiles' attention to detail to that of Larry Brown, who coached Detroit to a championship.

"I like what (Skiles) brings to the table, the fact that he coaches everyone the same way and doesn't play favorites," Wallace said. "If the guys not getting it done, he's not afraid to let him know. As far as the words he had with the Pistons last year, I'm a Bull now. If they don't like him, I don't like them."

At 32, Wallace may not have many prime years left, and he has never averaged double figures in points during a career that began in 1996, so the Bulls did not fill their need for an interior scorer when they acquired him.

Instead, they strengthened a defense that was already good but committed too many fouls. Although opponents shot a league-low 42.6 percent, they attempted 505 more free throws than the Bulls.

Chandler had a habit of collecting quick fouls, but that shouldn't be a problem with Wallace, who has fouled out just four times in his career.

Panthers questions during bye

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Last season, Lucas had six interceptions, Carolina as a whole had 23. Halfway through this season, the Panthers have taken the ball away from opponents only seven times.

Panthers' quarterback Jake Delhomme has been intercepted five times and many times at game changing points.

"You don't want to go on a roller coaster ride during the season," Delhomme said. "You want to stay on one of those kiddie rides and keep it

kind of steady and we're not doing that right now."

Delhomme said with eight more games left, the Panthers have to turn it around.

The race for the NFC South crown is tight because Atlanta, New Orleans and Carolina are all 2-1 in the division, though Carolina is 2-3 in the NFC.

Delhomme said after the bye, the Panthers have to come back to work.

"You don't look for excuses, that's the first thing. You have to look yourself in the

mirror and say I have to play better, I have to work harder," he said.

Wide receiver Keyshawn Johnson said no one wants to go into the bye week at 4-4 but, "it is what it is."

"We have to put this behind us, watch the tape and come back and get ready for Tampa," said Johnson, who dropped a key pass that looked as if it would have gone for a touchdown. "We had opportunities, we just didn't cash them in."

Her dream is life in the pits

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said Thomas. She is 5 feet, 7 inches and weighs 160 pounds, about 25 pounds less than when she left Wisconsin.

And although Thomas prefers being off the radar, she does not go unnoticed. As an African-American and as a woman, Thomas has overcome two hurdles to compete at the professional level.

"People tend to look at you more and question what you do and if you have the ability to do it," she said. "There are always people I know that, once they see what you do, they go out and tell everybody."

And she gives them plenty to talk about.

The first time Thomas went over the wall was in a non-points event at the Nextel Open in May at Lowe's Motor Speedway. She cleaned the grill and took tape off the windshield.

"I remember standing on the infield watching them play and watching the cars drive around the track and thinking, 'Oh my gosh, I never thought I was going to be here doing this stuff.'"

She has made quite an impression doing that stuff in the fastest growing sport in America.

"She catches on so damn quick that it's amazing," said Derek Sutton, a fabricator and classmate of Thomas' at Bobby Isaac Motorsports. "If she wants to do it she will."

In addition to changing tires, Thomas is a fabricator in the CJM Motorsports shop in Mooresville. She does welding and makes miscellaneous parts of the car.

Thomas' decision to work in a practically all-male environment was made while she was in another field dominated by men.

After the war in Iraq started, she volunteered for the Army. While undergoing basic training in Missouri, she had some second thoughts.

"It was really unsettling," she said. "You never really know if you're going to go to war and defend your country. It makes you think if you joined for the right reason."

Two years later, she received an honorable discharge after injuring her knees. She then turned her thoughts to racing.

"I waited way longer than what I should have," she said. "I let people say that if I came down here with the way the sport is, there is no way I could make it. I really don't think that is true."

Thomas wants to make it as a crew chief one day, but her plan now is to improve her skills and to land a job with a bigger team. She's has offers from other Nextel Cup teams, but knows she knows she has to pay her dues at the bottom, working on teams that are fairly new and have limited budgets.

"It has been hectic because we are lower on the totem pole at NASCAR," said Thomas. "We have to rush because we are the last to go through everything. It's a little bit harder for the smaller team to make it through everything."

Many of her friends and relatives thought it would be too hard for a black woman to make it in the auto racing world.

No matter the version, new Camry has style and options

Toyota has ruled the top-selling sedan spot for a while with its bread and butter Camry, a well-built but boring car that was reliable to a fault.

The 2007 Camry is probably still reliable, but boring it is not. Toyota has given the car a much-needed dose of style and even more refinement that should keep it America's top selling car.

But wait, is this a Camry that drives with a touch of aggression? Why, yes, it certainly does. Toyota's even thrown in a SE version that's sportier.

The new Camry is about the same size as the outgoing model but has more interior space. But let's talk about exterior first. The new shape isn't extravagant, but it's now flowing lines are more appealing than the previous model. The grill is integrated nicely and is more subtle.

The interior sparkles with refinement. The instrument cluster is ringed with chrome and the gauges look Lexus-designed. The center stack houses the excellent stereo and optional voice-activated navigation system.

The seats are very comfortable, front and back. There's plenty of leg, head and hip room for even tall folks. The really tall may want to check out the cavernous Avalon.

I test drove all Camrys at an event and was pleased with all. The V6 was powerful, delivering stunning acceleration and passing power. At 268 horses, the engine is a jewel.

I recently spent more time in a four-cylinder and hybrid. The LE four-banger was nearly as quiet as the six, except under hard acceleration. Passing power was good, but 0-60 times were, let's say, leisurely.

The hybrid was even a bit slower, but it would be my pick from the bunch. There's something about 40 miles per gallon in the city and 38 mpg on the highway for a car this size that just makes sense. City miles are higher because hybrids use the electric engine in urban areas. A conventional gas engine kicks in during highway driving.

The hybrid handles much like its gasoline sister - great ride, good handling, solid brakes and nicely weighted steering. The hybrid will cost a bit more. At \$27,800, it was well equipped with killer JBL stereo, stability and traction control and navigation.

The LE had about the same equipment at \$24,135. Its 24 mpg city and 33 mpg highway was no slouch either. Neither car had leather seats.

You can save money by going Korean and getting more car and a better warranty. Thing is, I don't think you would get a better car than this. Toyota's hit a grand slam.

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