

NASCAR QUIZ

Q: Which driver has the most Cup wins at Pocono?
A: Bill Elliott (5)

NASCAR INSIDER

THIS WEEK

Race: Pennsylvania 500
Where: Pocono Raceway
When: 1:30 p.m. ET, Sunday
Television: TNT
Defending race winner: Kurt Busch



A more mature Jeff Gordon sees himself as ...

'a better guy'

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

The Jeff Gordon who could tie the late Dale Earnhardt on NASCAR's career victories list with a win at Pocono Raceway this weekend is a far different fellow from the "Wonder Boy" who burst onto the Cup scene more than 14 years ago.

"The signs of the changes aren't hard to notice, and Gordon, 34, said they're for the better."

For one, he believes his fiancée, Ingrid Vandebosch, the Belgian actress and model, will get a better husband than his first wife, former Miss Winston Brooke Sealy got.

"I feel like that I'm older. I'm more mature," he said. "I think I have a better idea of who I am and what I want out of life and who I want to spend my life with."

POCONO RACEWAY

Track length: 2.5 miles
Race length: 200 laps/500 miles
Banking in Turn 1: 14 degrees
Banking in Turn 2: 8 degrees
Banking in Turn 3: 6 degrees
Frontstretch: 3,740 feet
Backstretch: 3,055 feet
First race: Aug. 4, 1974; Purulater 500
Qualifying record: Kasey Kahne, Dodge, 172.533 mph; June 11, 2004
Race record: Rusty Wallace, Ford, 144.892 mph; July 21, 1996

I think that, in my opinion, is a better guy."

Other signs of a changing Gordon are his unexpected shove of Matt Kenseth in the garage at Bristol Motor Speedway earlier this year and his unapologetic boot of Kenseth on the track at Chicagoland two weeks ago.

It's not that he's trying to portray a tough-guy image. He even admitted liking croquet, something he likely wouldn't have done in his earlier days when the late Earnhardt tried to intimidate him by referring to him as "Wonder Boy."

"Don't knock croquet, man," he said with a chuckle. "It's challenging, and I would challenge anybody to some croquet."



He said his life so far, even though it has been lived under the bright spotlight of media and fan attention, isn't really much different from what the average Joe experiences. He subscribes to the notion that most of life's important decisions are made when the decider is too young and inexperienced to know what to do. He should know. He was thrust into the NASCAR spotlight at the relatively young age of 21.

"As I get older, I think about all those things," he said. "It's life, and you can't change how life progresses. You can only learn from all your experiences."

He said that others sometimes try to help, but the potentially helpful advice rarely gets put to use.

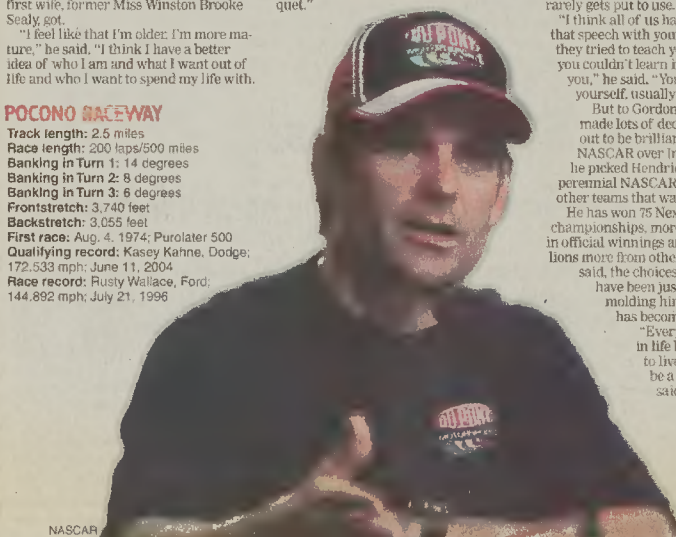
"I think all of us have been through that speech with your parents where they tried to teach you some lesson but you couldn't learn it by what they told you," he said. "You had to learn it yourself, usually the hard way."

But to Gordon's credit, he has made lots of decisions that turned out to be brilliant. He chose NASCAR over Indy car racing, and he picked Hendrick Motorsports, a perennial NASCAR powerhouse, over other teams that wanted him.

He has won 75 Nextel Cup races, four championships, more than \$78 million in official winnings and countless millions more from other sources. But, he said, the choices that didn't pan out have been just as important in molding him into the person he has become.

"Everything I've learned in life has only helped me to live my life better and be a better person," he said.

Jeff Gordon, with two victories in 2006, is ninth in the Cup standings.



NASCAR

What ever happened to ...

Delma Cowart

Delma Cowart of Savannah, Ga., was the "Clown Prince" of NASCAR racing during his era, which began in 1981 at Atlanta Motor Speedway and ended in the mid-1990s during the NASCAR All-Star race at Lowe's Motor Speedway.

Perhaps nothing illustrates Cowart's fun-loving approach better than his final NASCAR run. He showed up to run the Cup race, but his engine blew in practice. His crew struggled throughout the afternoon to make the repairs and finished the work just as prayer was said and the national anthem sung. The only thing missing: the required NASCAR inspection.

"They said, 'Gentleman, start your engines,' so I cranked mine up in the garage area," said Cowart, 64. "I hopped in it and drove by the tech shed, and it was locked up."

He figured, "What the heck?" so he pulled onto the track and started racing. He ran about four laps before NASCAR officials black-flagged him

off the track. "They were raising Cain with my crew chief, and after the race they called me to the trailer for a little conversation," Cowart said. "It was kind of a warm conversation. ... They said I should have known better. "I told them I didn't think they'd mind."

Told he'd be fined \$5,000, he paused and said, "Make it \$5,000,000 because I ain't giving you five cents."

And the NASCAR days were over for Cowart, who now works as a construction contractor in his hometown.

But the sport's old-timers haven't forgotten him. Former champion Benny Parsons still laughs about the time Cowart qualified for the Daytona 500, then threw a legendary party at a Daytona Beach hotel.

"I don't think he showed back up at the track until Sunday," Parsons said. "He was strictly in it for the good times. ... It was as good a way as any, but it wouldn't work today."

—Rick Minter, Cox News Service

NUMERICALLY SPEAKING

95

Bonus points earned by Greg Biffle (right) for leading laps in Nextel Cup races, tops among all drivers.



NASCAR

15

Top-10 finishes in Nextel Cup this season by points leader Jimmie Johnson, tops among all drivers.

11

Top-10 finishes by David Reutimann, tops among all Craftsman Truck Series drivers.

4

DNFs (Did Not Finish races) by Jeff Gordon, most among drivers in the top 10 in Nextel Cup points.

STANDINGS

NEXTEL CUP

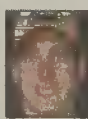
Following the Lenox Industrial Tools 300

1. Jimmie Johnson 2,789; previous: 1
2. Matt Kenseth 2,721; previous: 2
3. Jeff Burton 2,478; previous: 4
4. Kyle Busch 2,455; previous: 8
5. Mark Martin 2,451; previous: 6
6. Kasey Kahne 2,445; previous: 5
7. Dale Earnhardt Jr. 2,428; previous: 3
8. Kevin Harvick 2,408; previous: 9
9. Jeff Gordon 2,342; previous: 10
10. Greg Biffle 2,342; previous: 11

Cup next up: Pennsylvania 500; Pocono Raceway
TV: 1:30 p.m. ET, Sunday; TNT

Busch next up: Goody's 250; Martinsville Speedway
TV: 3:30 p.m. ET, Saturday; TNT

Truck next up: Power Stroke Diesel 200; O'Reilly Raceway Park
TV: 8:30 p.m. ET, Aug. 4; Speed Channel



Kyle Busch has jumped to fourth in the Cup standings.

BUSCH SERIES

1. Kevin Harvick 3,092; previous: 1
2. Carl Edwards 2,784; previous: 2
3. Clint Bowyer 2,705; previous: 3
4. Denny Hamlin 2,667; previous: 4
5. J.J. Yeley 2,636; previous: 5

TRUCK SERIES

1. Todd Bodine 2,161; previous: 1
2. David Reutimann 2,044; previous: 3
3. Johnny Benson 1,998; previous: 2
4. Rick Crawford 1,930; previous: 5
5. Ted Musgrave 1,913; previous: 4

Rick Minter's

OBSERVATIONS

Here are some of the key storylines this week heading to Pocono:

Free fallin'

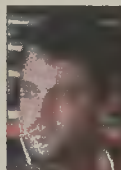
Jeff Gordon's back-to-back Cup championships in 1997-1998 haven't been duplicated since, and it's beginning to look like it'll take a Herculean effort for the current champ, Tony Stewart, to match Gordon's feat.

After being safely inside the top 10 in points for most of the season, Stewart has dropped out of the elite group. Stewart's latest setback came after a run-in on the track at New Hampshire International Speedway with fellow Indiana native Ryan Newman that left him 57th at the end of the Lenox Industrial Tools 300.

It represents a dramatic change of fortune since the 11th race of the season, at Darlington Raceway, where Stewart was second in points to Jimmie Johnson, 63 points back.

His troubles started at the next race in Charlotte where he broke his scapula in a hard crash. He and relief driver Ricky Rudd lost more ground the next week at Dover because of a penalty for speeding on pit road. Although he won the Pepsi 400 at Daytona, he ran out of gas at Chicagoland, had engine problems at Infineon and wrecked at Michigan.

He has seven races to regain a spot in the 10-driver, 10-race, season-ending run to the title, but he's just 11 points behind Greg Biffle, who holds the 10th and final spot in the top 10.



STEWART

Moving on up

New Hampshire winner Kyle Busch gained four spots in the standings, jumping from eighth to fourth, with his latest Cup victory, but as he cautioned in Victory Lane, it's too early to assume he or any other driver near him in the standings will make the Chase.

"The biggest thing with that is ... the difference in fourth and 10th is so dang close," he said.

Even though he hadn't had time to do the math, Busch was right about how tight the standings are after 19 points races. Leader Jimmie Johnson and second-place Matt Kenseth are well ahead of the pack — Kenseth is just 68 points behind Johnson, while third-place Jeff Burton is 311 points out of the lead. But from third to 12th, the points spread is just 154.

Changing times

Ray Evernham's No. 19 Dodge appears to be one of the key pieces to the next big driver swap in NASCAR.

After making the Chase for the Nextel Cup the past two seasons, the No. 19 team and driver Jeremy Mayfield are 38rd in the points standings heading into this week's race at Pocono, where Mayfield beat Darrell Waltrip to get his first Cup victory in 1998 and where he knocked the late Dale Earnhardt aside on the last lap to get career win No. 3 two seasons later.

"There's now talk in the garage that Mayfield, who is all but guaranteed by out of the Chase, may be headed to one of the new Toyota teams. And there's just as much speculation that Elliot Sadler could leave his struggling No. 98 at Robert Yates Racing to team up with Evernham, who also fields the Dodges driven by Kasey Kahne and Scott Riggs.

Pressed about the issue by reporters at New Hampshire, Evernham referred them back to his comments from the week before.

"Jeremy and I are going to continue to work on getting this team where it needs to be," Evernham told reporters at Chicago.

"There's a lot of racing left this season, and I'm confident that we can get this program on track."

Eying a Busch title

For a guy who's preoccupied with making the cut for the Chase for the Nextel Cup, Kevin Harvick is in the midst of a surprisingly strong run to the Busch Series championship.

Despite having to shuttle between garages — and sometimes between tracks in different cities — Harvick has completed every lap of Busch Series competition this year. He has won three times and recorded 12 top-five and 17 top-10 finishes in 20 starts. His worst finish is a 19th-place run at Milwaukee.

His closest challenger, fellow Cup regular Carl Edwards, has three victories, 11 top-five and 15 top-10 finishes. But he has struggled with three finishes of 36th or worse, and that's why, despite a win at New Hampshire last week, he's still second in the standings and 308 points out of the lead.

Second chances

Craftsman Truck Series team owner Billy Ballew must be either soft-hearted or shrewd — or both.

Twice in his career he has put drivers in his No. 15 Chevrolet that others wouldn't touch — drivers who had been banned from NASCAR for violating the sanctioning body's drug policies.

First Ballew gave Shane Hmiel a second chance. Hmiel won a race in Ballew's truck, then moved to the Busch Series before failing another drug test and being put out of the sport.

This month, Ballew took a chance on another driver with a similar record — Kevin Grubb. So far, it looks like another successful combination. Grubb ran among the leaders two weeks ago at Kentucky Speedway before finishing 21st, and last week at Memphis he was a front-runner again before finishing 14th.

"You know me, I'll take a chance," Ballew said.

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