

Gordon contemplates life after racing

By MIKE MULHERN
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The Maldives are a swath of gorgeous coral islands, more than a thousand in a distant archipelago in the Indian Ocean.

COLUMN

So when Jeff Gordon wanted to play Robinson Crusoe and get away from it all, that is the place he chose: Paris to Johannesburg to Dubai to Sri Lanka to Male', and then by seaplane or boat to some beachy atolls, to dive with the mantas.

Next winter, maybe the Seychelles.

But this week, it's Daytona. Midlife crisis? Although he'll soon be 35, probably not.

Gordon concedes that he's trying to figure out what to do with the rest of his life. He's starting his 14th season on the NASCAR tour and looking toward win No. 74, which would tie him with the late Dale Earnhardt, once his fiercest rival. But Gordon is already looking beyond.

"I can tell you I won't be here for another 11 years," Gordon said with a laugh. "No way, man. That would be 25 years, and I don't plan on being here at this level 11 years from now."

He has this NASCAR thing



Jeff Gordon, second from right, and other Hendrick Motorsports drivers speak during a stop in the NASCAR Media Tour in Harrisburg, N.C., on Wednesday.

down pretty darn pat. He's the early favorite to win another Daytona 500, and new crew chief Steve Letarte seems to be fitting in quite smoothly.

But Gordon, with four championships and a perennial title pick despite last season's slump, is getting restless.

"Wow, here I am, 25 years from when I started racing, when just getting behind the wheel of a race-

car was fun, a hobby, and now I'm doing it as a profession, at the highest level, and I'm winning races and championships, and I'm on TV, and making money..."

"You've got to remind yourself it's a huge privilege, because you can get caught up in the rut of the grind: going to the track every week, to the testing, to all the sponsor events. Sometimes you lose sight of that.

"You've got to remind yourself just how good it really is."

But challenges? "There's nothing I need to do, but there are a lot of things I still want to do," Gordon said. "And I would rather have the desire of wanting to do it, instead of the pressure of needing to do it. I'm still hungry."

"I don't really have a passion for racing. It's never been my goal to go out and race; it's been my goal to go out and win. As long as I have a chance of winning — or working to get back to that — as long as I have that...."

"I've experienced some things I've enjoyed, co-hosting TV shows, getting involved with companies and seeing their marketing plans work. I love seeing ideas come together. I love the business side of racing. You never know when this is going to end, and you have to set yourself up for the future."

Gordon says that he is looking for something that will produce the kind of passion in him that winning races does.

"Racing has given me opportunities," he said. "So my main goal is racing. But one day I hope I have myself in position where I can find what really inspires me and what gives me passion outside of racing, and work toward that."

"I don't know if I've found that

yet. I've found some little things, like diving; swimming with those mantas was cool.

"Now I don't know if I'd really recommend the Maldives, because that's a long, long, long way. But once you got there, you really didn't want to go anywhere for a while, because it's really, really nice."

A break like that should be just the tonic, Letarte said.

"Jeff and I have learned that to be successful, both personally and professionally, you have to do other things," he said. "So he decompressed on his vacation, and I decompressed with my family. We had a baby girl, so now we have two children."

"And if you don't stop and recharge, you can't do this to the level you need to do it now."

Letarte is only 26, but he's an 11-year veteran with Gordon at Rick Hendrick's, going back to the Ray Evernham days.

And Letarte seems absolutely undaunted by the job he has been handed after former crew chief Robbie Loomis left.

"That's because my father taught me a work ethic when I was very young. It's just plain racing, whether you're trying to win the Oxford 250 up in Maine or the Daytona 500," Letarte said.

Loomis left after six years with Gordon and Hendrick.

"Robbie was a spectacular crew

chief — they won a championship and a lot of races — and I enjoyed working for him," Letarte said. "I feel bad that the decision for him to move on was made before we had that 'bad' season, and I hate he had to leave on that note, because Robbie deserves more. He brought so much to the company; he built this shop, and he taught me more than anyone. He's a first-class guy."

"But no one could step away more gracefully than he did. And we still call each other up and talk, and we still go out to dinner."

Why a little-known guy like Letarte instead of big-name crew chief?

"Some deals work best with just one franchise player," Letarte said. "The Lakers tried it with two, and it didn't really work. We have one franchise player, and he drives. I just set up the cars."

"And we have confidence in each other. It's like a marriage; my wife and I have been married four years, and I'm still learning, and my father has been married 29 years, and he told me, 'As long as you realize you're not always right and you're not always wrong....' It's just like that between a driver and crew chief."

Mike Mulhern writes for the Winston-Salem (N.C.) Journal. Send comments to mmulhern@wsjournal.com.

Franklin preseason favorite in conference

Special to the Daily Journal

Franklin College has been chosen as the favorite to win the 2006 Heartland Collegiate Athletic Conference baseball championship in the league's preseason coaches' poll.

The Grizzlies edged out Manchester College by three points, 60 to 57, in the annual poll.

The poll consists of votes from the coaches of each of the eight teams in the HCAC. Franklin received five of eight first-place votes, and Manchester claimed the rest.

Franklin had a successful 2005 season, during which it earned its second HCAC regular-season championship. In addition, several notable players achieved awards, including:

- David Verdeyen, conference MVP and a First-Team NCAA Division III All-Mideast Region selection.

- Andy Clark, HCAC Freshman of the Year and a Second-Team NCAA Division III All-Mideast Region selection.
- Nathan Roberts and Brandon McWhorter, members of the 2005 HCAC All-Conference Second Team. McWhorter also was voted to the Second-Team NCAA Division III All-Mideast Region.

Verdeyen will anchor the Grizzlies' lineup and will look to improve on last year. As a designated hitter, he batted .387, with 12 home runs and 37 RBIs.

Franklin will look to senior second baseman Roberts to add strength to the lineup after hitting .349 a year ago with 42 runs scored, 36 RBI and 15 doubles.

Leading the Grizzlies' pitching staff will be right-hander Clark, who went 8-2 with a 2.20 ERA. Clark struck out 68 batters in 77½ innings pitched.

Also solidifying the rotation will be senior right-hander McWhorter, who posted a 7-2 record and 2.36 ERA. He also struck out 54 batters in 76½ innings.

Other returning seniors are right-handed pitcher Dan Shearin and catcher Ben Werner, both Center Grove High School graduates; and right-handed pitcher Brian Rejer.

The Grizzlies' 2006 baseball season begins Feb. 25 against Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology in Port Charlotte, Fla. The HCAC schedule will begin March 24 with a home series against Bluffton University.

BRIGHT OUTLOOK

The 2006 Heartland Collegiate Athletic Conference preseason baseball coaches' poll, with first-place votes in parentheses:

Rank	School	Pts.
1.	Franklin (5)	60
2.	Manchester (3)	57
3.	Transylvania	48
4.	Mount St. Joseph	42
5.	Anderson	33
6.	Hanover	20
7.	Defiance	18
8.	Bluffton	10

• Bond

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

any fear of anything," said Neesen, who grew up in Minnesota and taught Garrett how to skate at age 5. "During that time I devoted my whole life to him, almost to a fault. I didn't do anything without him."

"On weekends, we'd go roller blading. We'd roller blade through Greenwood for hours and hours. It helped his skating ability. I tried to keep him on the ice during the summer and the off-season."

Hockey isn't a wildly popular spectator or recreational activity in Indiana. But once Garrett discovered it, he never stopped playing.

Garrett started out by playing in recreation leagues and moved into house, or entry level, leagues as his skills progressed.

In a house league, players are placed on teams according to age and ability. Games are played at a local rink, and coaches work on a volunteer basis.

"I think he liked the fact that only a couple of kids in our area were involved in it," Neesen said. "It was something that made him unique."

As Garrett's skills improved, he moved up the competitive ladder.

This season, he and other hockey friends tried out for the Central States, an AAA Bantam youth travel hockey team based at Arctic Zone in Westfield.

None of the players made the team, so they decided to try out for the Arctic Blast, an AA1 Bantam travel team.

Forty players participated in the Blast's two-day tryouts. They were

"Ever since I was little, it's always been hockey, hockey, hockey."

Garrett Neesen

Greenwood resident on devoting so much time to playing hockey

evaluated on skating, shooting and game-situation drills. They also were graded on a 5-on-5 scrimmage.

First-year Blast coach Matt Catron liked Garrett's physical play, as did the rest of the coaching staff.

Garrett had no problem making the team.

"With his size, he definitely takes advantage of the physical play," Catron said. "The coaching staff is impressed with how Garrett has started carrying the puck and shooting."

"He's starting to become a good all-around hockey player."

Neesen's work schedule doesn't allow him to attend as many games as he'd like. He wasn't able to go to Canada to see the Blast win the Silver Stick championship. So the family has relied on Garrett's grandmother, Vickie Neesen, for support.

She typically transports Garrett to practices and games. She has watched Garrett play since the beginning and made the trip to Canada. She said the sport has helped her grandson make friends.

"As he's gotten older, the pace is faster and more exciting," Vickie Neesen said. "Now, he's not in the penalty box as much as he had been."

"He's out there doing something and

stopping the puck. It's neat just watching (the boys) come together."

But whenever Mike Neesen gets the chance, he drives Garrett to practice and watches his games.

"It's incredible watching him,"

Neesen said. "I played hockey just recreationally. To watch him develop and to be able to stand on his skates and take control out there has been just phenomenal to watch."

"It's almost like what I was never able to do."

Three years ago, father and son introduced Neesen's 8-year-old stepbrother, Gavin, to hockey. He enjoys the sport almost as much as Garrett does.

"I had only played one sport before, and that was baseball," said Gavin, who attends Isom Central Elementary School. "I wanted to get into another sport. I was bored sitting around the house ... and wanted to play another sport."

"I like everything about it. I like playing every position."

Hockey consumes much of Garrett's free time.

While his friends hang out together after school, he gets a ride from his father or grandmother to practices in Indianapolis and Westfield.

Although Garrett acknowledges he'd like to spend more time with his friends, he understands the sacrifices he has to make to play the game he loves. And he wouldn't have it any other way.

"It is hard," Garrett said. "I'd like to hang out with my friends, but I never get the chance to. It sucks sometimes, but it's worth it. Ever since I was little, it's always been hockey, hockey, hockey. It's worth it because I love hockey."

• Player

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

"He tried to downplay it like it was something you do every day," Mike Neesen said. "He started out the conversation, 'Hey dad, how are you doing?' I take it you're on the way back from work."

"He called me early, so I thought he didn't win and said, 'So you guys didn't win.'"

"But he said, 'We won it all.' He was excited, as excited as a 14-year-old boy gets."

The Blast will have their name and a

picture enshrined in the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto, Canada, along with previous Silver Stick finals champions.

First-year Blast coach Matt Catron experienced a wave of emotions throughout the game. But he couldn't have been happier with the outcome.

"It was probably the most exciting game I've ever coached," Catron said.

The Blast went 4-1 in the tournament, defeating Forest, Ontario; New York; Park Hill, Ontario; and Grand Valley, Ontario, in the finals. The team's only loss came in a 3-2 defeat to Norwood, Ontario.

The Blast, a representative of the Indianapolis Racers Travel Hockey Association, was one of eight teams invited to the finals. The field also

included five Canadian teams and two other U.S. teams, one from Dallas and one from New York.

Teams received invitations after playing in the Silver Sticks regional tournament in November in Fort Wayne.

Although they lost in the regional finals to a team from Michigan, the Blast still received an invitation to attend and participate in the tournament.

For Neesen, the experience will never be matched.

"The tournament in Canada was a good experience for us to go to," Neesen said. "When we won the tournament, there was a lot of energy out there. We were proud of each other. It was just great."

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