

MOTOR SPORTS

THE DRIVE FOR FIVE

At 43, **Jeff Gordon** can hear the call of retirement, but the kid who once polarized NASCAR finally has the respect of all in the sport, and his eyes are firmly fixed on a fifth Cup title

BY ANDREW LAWRENCE

Photograph by
Nick Laham/NASCAR/
Getty Images



SHADES OF GLORY
Gordon, whose last Cup title came in 2001, has three wins already in '14 and enters the Chase as the No. 2 seed.

→ **THE QUALIFYING** session for the Coca-Cola 600 plays out over three rounds. This past May, Jeff Gordon didn't make it past the first.

There'd been every reason to believe that Gordon would be on the track at Charlotte Motor Speedway for much longer on that Thursday evening. The weather was cooperative, a cool and breezy spring day in Concord, N.C., and Gordon's number 24 Chevrolet (with its sponsorship decals touting the AARP's Drive to End Hunger—a fitting bit of brand synergy for a driver who, at age 43, was the ninth oldest in the field) was primed and ready. And Gordon himself was fresh off his first win of the 2014 Sprint Cup season, 12 days earlier at Kansas Speedway—an achievement that effectively sealed a berth in the Chase for the Sprint Cup, NASCAR's 10-race playoff that begins this weekend at Chicagoland Speedway.

The track in Kansas City was not unlike the one at Charlotte—a mile-and-a-half oval. But Charlotte distinguishes itself in its corners, which slope upward from a lush green infield to the wall at an angle of 24 degrees. The setup offers a terrific calf

workout for a pedestrian climbing the track, but it's punishing to a body in the driver's seat. Taken at 192 mph, a speed that would've assured safe passage into the second round of qualifying, the banked curves subject the driver to almost four times the force of gravity. To put that in perspective, NASA was concerned about shuttle astronauts being exposed to 3 g's for the nine minutes of liftoff.

Gordon wasn't in the cockpit nearly that long; his three-lap trip around Charlotte lasted less than 90 seconds. Somewhere on one of those curves, as Gordon twisted in his seat to wrestle the steering wheel and keep the car under heel, a mighty g load hit him square in his left side—"almost like a shot," he says. It reverberated in the lumbar muscles in his back and tore down his left leg. In two decades of racing he'd never felt anything like it.

And this is a man who knows from injury. For the past seven years Gordon has raced with chronic lower back pain, the result of a life spent strapped into one of the world's most turbulent work spaces, not to mention a number of violent wrecks that he has,

miraculously in some cases, walked away from. (A YouTube compilation of his crashes runs a harrowing four minutes and 17 seconds.) But the jolt he felt at Charlotte, without his car being touched, "was more of a sciatic-type pain." It scared him.

Pride, however, wouldn't allow him to admit as much. "My goal has always been to be one of the strongest links of the team," Gordon says. Even now he talks about beelining it to the doctor's later that evening as if he were simply running in for a routine checkup. Never mind that he'd be subjected to a round of intensive lower lumbar therapy, ranging from simple stretching to electrical nerve stimulation to a cortisone injection.

The medical attention Gordon received that Thursday evening at Charlotte was helpful. The seat time that followed was not—and it wasn't even in his car. For most of the next day and a half, Gordon was sedentary in his air-conditioned hauler, taking one meeting after the next. By Saturday he was as stiff as a corpse, and he strained to climb back into the car for a morning practice session. As soon as he merged into traffic, the sciatic pain was back.

Gordon tried valiantly to shake it, hitting an average speed of 190.07 mph on his opening lap, then 191.66 on his fourth. But his efforts only made the pain worse. On the 11th lap Gordon headed to the pits. He'd had enough. Admitting that to the number 24 car's crew chief, Alan Gustafson, stung almost as much. "When I called Alan over to the window, it was tough to tell him that I had an issue like that, that at that moment I was the weakest link."

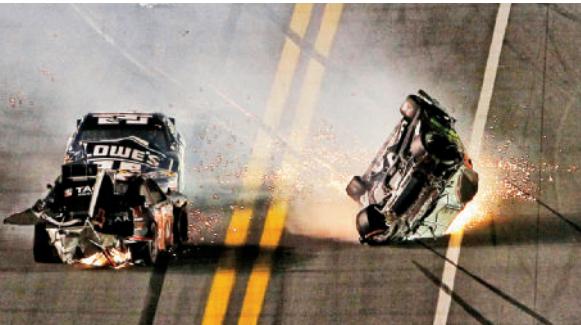
The decision to cut out of practice early probably helped Gordon in the long run, as it enabled him to receive another round of medical treatment that boosted him to a gutsy seventh-place finish—after starting 27th—in the 600. But the back scare had Gordon considering more than just his physical limitations in the car. It had him contemplating retirement after almost 23 years of Cup racing. "I can tell you that if [the severe back pain] happens many more times," he told reporters after Charlotte, "I won't have a choice."

THE OLDER Gordon gets, the more he finds himself wondering what a pensioner's life might be like. Sometimes the thoughts visit him at home when his daughter, Ella, pounces on him, which seven-year-olds are wont to do. She always recoils in seconds, mindful of the damage she might be inflicting upon her old man. ("I hope I didn't hurt your back,"



BALANCING ACT

Gordon (soaking up a win with Gustafson this year and enduring a spark-spitting exit from Daytona in 2012) has long since learned to integrate the highs and lows of racing with his time with Vandebosch, Leo and Ella.



she'll say apologetically.) Sometimes Gordon will hear himself speaking those thoughts aloud, with microphones present, as he did at a preseason media day at Daytona, when he suggested that the best way to go out would be with a fifth Cup championship.

After setting that hypothetical goal, Gordon has raced with a renewed sense of urgency. Since the Kansas race, and the reality check at Charlotte, he has won two more times—at Indianapolis and Michigan. This week he enters the Chase as the No. 2 seed, after having led in the standings through 17 of the regular season's 26 races.

Gordon, who last won the Cup in 2001, hasn't been this well positioned to grab a title since '07, when he also entered the Chase as the No. 2 seed. (He finished the season second, behind Jimmie Johnson.) Still, even if Gordon falls short, his legacy is unassailable. He might be one of the best ever to turn laps in a stock car. Only three drivers have won more Cup titles—he took three in four seasons between 1995 and '98 and added a fourth in '01—and his 91 career victories rank him third on the alltime list, behind David Pearson (105) and Richard Petty (200).

WILL SCHNEIDER/NASCAR/GETTY IMAGES (TOP); JAMIE SOURE/GETTY IMAGES (YOUNG GORDON)

33

Victories out of 96 races in 1996, '97 and '98. His 13 wins in '98 tied Richard Petty's record for most wins in a season in NASCAR's modern era, which dates to 1972.

9

Career Cup wins on road courses, the most by any driver.

76

Career pole positions, the most by any driver in the modern era—with at least one pole in a record 22 consecutive seasons.



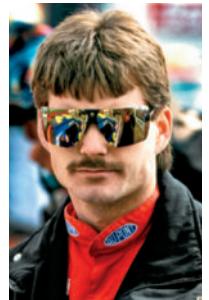
order recalled a moment three years ago when Gordon busted out some break-dance moves onstage during a panel for NASCAR's Champion's Week—a Comic-Con for gearheads in Las Vegas—after some good-natured goading from his fellow drivers and cheers from fans. But in this instance Gordon had to let down his audience (rarified though it was) because he couldn't risk throwing out his back again and disappointing the fans who prefer to see his moves behind the wheel.

Significantly, these fans—the NASCAR diehards—have only recently begun to throw their support behind one of the most iconic American drivers of this era. When he broke into Cup racing in 1992 as a much-hyped star from the single A Sprint car series, Gordon was regarded warily. He wasn't from the South but from California, by way of Indiana; wasn't that old, only 20—just old enough to grow a pornstache that would haunt him the rest of his days. "I grew up watching him when ESPN had *Thursday and Saturday Night Thunder*," says 32-year-old driver AJ Allmendinger, a newbie to the Chase. "I just thought it was cool that this young kid was coming in and whoopin' all the guys' asses."

Gordon wasn't exactly timid either, handing out whoopin's to beloved figures like Darrell Waltrip and Dale Earnhardt Sr. at a rate of 10 wins per season while driving for Hendrick Motorsports. Even more disconcerting, Northern elites—not just Cali boys like Allmendinger, but also people who didn't even *like* racing—were eating it up. For a sport with deep Southern roots, Gordon was an easy foil. "It was a very polarized crowd back then," says Ray Evernham, the crew chief who served as the architect for Gordon's ascendance. "Everywhere we would go, half the crowd would be excited for Jeff and the other half would boo."

But just as it seemed that Gordon might wring all the fun from a sport that pushes parity harder than any other, his dominance ebbed. In 1999, Evernham left Hendrick to form his own team. Four years later Gordon's first marriage, to former pinup girl Brooke Sealey, ended in divorce. Four years after that his back started acting up.

All the while his sport kept changing: Between 2004 and '14 the competition standard for race cars was modified twice and the title format four times. And yet the dude abided, not squarely in the picture but still in the frame, collecting 13 wins between 2007 and '13. "I don't think he gets the credit for having sustained the level of success that he has over such a long period of time," says Gustafson. "It's maybe not as flashy as winning 13 races a year, but it's unbelievably hard to do with all the changes in



In his second life, Gordon can be the very thing he couldn't be in his prime: a fan favorite. "He's more popular today than he was when he first got into the sport," says Helton.



RAUNIER ERHARDT/NASCAR/GETTY IMAGES; JOHNSON: JARED C. TILTON/GETTY IMAGES; KAHNE: WILL SCHNECKLOTH/NASCAR/GETTY IMAGES; LOGANO: JEFF GORDON: JARED WICKERHAM/GETTY IMAGES (STEWART)

chief I've ever had, 'Please, don't treat me like a past champion. Treat me how you would treat any driver that gets in the car that you want to win with. Whatever it takes to get to the top.'

During their first two years together, Gordon and Gustafson enjoyed a honeymoon phase, winning five races and making the Chase both years. In 2013 the crew chief gave the driver a car that was strong enough to challenge for a playoff spot, but Gordon couldn't seem to keep it out of harm's way, crashing out of four of the regular season's first 18 races. When Gordon finished the July race at Loudon in 10th place after starting fifth, Gustafson finally gave him some tough love.

"Normally when I get back to the truck after a race, Alan's not there," Gordon says. "He's usually cleaning up his stuff at the pit box. Meanwhile, I'm in there stretching and dressing. After this particular race, though, he was standing there waiting for me and closed the door when I walked in. I don't exactly remember all that was said, but it was like at that moment he felt my frustration and I felt his. It made us stronger. It made us better. It made me respect him more because he called me out."

After clearing the air, Gordon landed on the pole for last September's regular-season finale at Richmond and finished eighth (just making the Chase), and he started first on the grid again the following month at Charlotte. Two races later, at Martinsville, he won for the first time all season. He would finish sixth in the standings, a four-year high.

This season Gordon and Gustafson have been in accord on details big (like setting up the car) and small (making his pit stops just right). As for perhaps the biggest issue, Gordon's back, the crew chief lets the driver deal with that one, which he

JEFF GORDON

"There is no weakness," says Gustafson of Gordon.

"Not in mental toughness, not in commitment, not in drive, not in his ability to handle pressure."

does with nightly icing and stretching. On race days, Gordon lies down for another bout of stretching with a personal trainer and rides one of those stationary bikes with the big fan for a front wheel because, you know, he's old school like that. "I used to watch these guys in the Tour de France riding stationary bikes and building up a sweat before they went out and rode, which I never actually understood," he says. "Now I get it."

By the time the Pure Michigan 400 rolled around in August, there was no sign of the *old* Jeff Gordon. Instead, a vintage version surfaced. He started on the pole after qualifying with a record lap of 206.56 mph and spent most of the race tangling with second-place qualifier Joey Logano. After yielding his position to Logano on a series of cautions, Gordon grabbed the lead back on the last restart of the day, with just over 16 laps to go, and never looked back.

Once he claimed the checkered flag and burned out his back tires in celebration, Gordon eased his Chevy into Victory Lane. There he was greeted by a gathering of family, friends, sponsors and media types. A confetti shower gave way to a team-issued ice bucket challenge—or what used to be called a Gatorade bath. The crowd thundered; if there was any booing, it was drowned out by the cheers.

As Gordon recognized his various sponsors and explained his patience to reporters, while dripping with a mixture of sweat and sports drink, he looked like a man who could go on and on. When he'll stop for good depends on his back, which is holding up so far. "It doesn't mean [the trouble] is not going to ever happen," he says. "It just means I'm doing everything I know how to do." □

EDGE RUSH
Gordon (24) pulled away from Logano (22) on the final restart to win at Michigan in August. It was his 91st career victory, third most in NASCAR history.

the rules, the team, the car, the track, the competition. He always tells me, 'I drive the car the same way I did.' No. He's had to evolve."

Says longtime NASCAR spotter Eddie D'Hondt, who has worked with Gordon since 2012, "Change is always going to happen in this sport. How quickly you adapt to it will affect the whole dynamic of [a race team]. Our driver is the model. The polished model. His record shows that."

Now in his 23rd Cup season, Gordon has evolved into a model of a different sort. At 43 and still in the hunt, he is a proxy for every competitor of advancing age who has ever been told to bag it. It helps that on the track Gordon has a puncher's chance to prevail. Unlike stick-and-ball sports, where mind and body don't often sync up for long, "racing," says team owner Rick Hendrick, "will give you that second life if you have the talent and haven't lost any of the skills." In his second life Gordon can be the very thing he couldn't be in his dominating prime: a fan favorite. "He's more popular today than he was when he first got into the sport," says NASCAR president Mike Helton. "The traditional support from a fan to him now is, You've proved yourself. You're our guy now."

GUSTAFSON, THOUGH, had always been a Gordon supporter. Perhaps too much of one. When the Hendrick team crew chief was reassigned to the number 24 car in 2011, he had every reason to believe his partnership with Gordon would produce a championship. Why not? He had spent the previous two seasons guiding the number 5 car driven by Mark Martin—a

man 12 years Gordon's senior who'd finished second in the standings in '09.

Gordon, meanwhile, under crew chief Steve Letarte, had been plagued by inconsistency, oscillating from a six-win campaign in 2007 to winless ones in '08 and '10. When the task fell to Gustafson to right the ship, he figured it wouldn't take much. "The thing that became very apparent with Jeff was how good he is at everything he does," Gustafson says. "There is no weakness—not in mental toughness, not in commitment, not in drive, not in his ability to handle pressure. After the success we had that first season [with the number 5 car], I just kinda sat back and thought, All we need is Jeff."

But for Gordon to be the Gordon of old, he needed something else: someone with the temerity to not just push him, but push him hard. "Ever since Ray Evernham," says Gordon, "I've told every crew

ROBERT LABERGE/NASCAR/GETTY IMAGES

Finale Four

NASCAR's postseason kicks off on Sunday, and it's a brand-new ball game. Unlike past editions of the Chase, which unfolded more like miniature points races, this year's 10-race playoff is an elimination contest. Four drivers from the field of 16 contenders will be eliminated after the first three races, four more after the next three, and four more after the ninth race. The highest finisher, then, among the "final four" at Homestead-Miami Speedway on Nov. 16 will win it all. With points resetting after each round, there'll be no coasting on an early lead. It's anyone's Chase. Here are four things to watch out for as it unfolds. —A.L.



1 Jimmie Johnson looks vulnerable. Not only has the six-time champ finished 14th or worse five times in the last nine races,

but he also had a breakdown of his own at Richmond, collapsing after the race with dehydration. Still, if anyone can bounce back, it's the driver who's trumped every playoff rule change NASCAR has thrown at him.



2 Hendrick remains the team to beat, fielding a lineup of Gordon, Johnson, a better-than-ever Dale

Earnhardt Jr.—all three-time winners this season—and Kasey Kahne (above), who sealed a Chase berth with a win at Atlanta in late August and is heating up at just the right time. And yet....



3 Don't be surprised if Penske pulls ahead. Brad Keselowski (the 2012 champ, above) has a series-leading four

race wins, and teammate Joey Logano, who is finally living up to the lofty expectations that greeted him when he arrived on the Cup scene six years ago, has three. It could come down to these two at Homestead.



4 He's not in the Chase, but three-time champ Tony Stewart will be a story pending the results of an investigation

into his fatally running over driver Kevin Ward Jr. on a dirt track in August. Welcomed back by NASCAR, Stewart will be racing for his first win of 2014, even as questions remain about the incident.