

JEFF GORDON BACK IN BAY AREA FOR THE DODGE/SAVE MART 350 AT INFINEON RACEWAY ON SUNDAY, JUNE 22, 2003

Vallejo native Jeff Gordon, driver of the No. 24 DuPont Chevrolet on the NASCAR Winston Cup circuit, was interviewed for this weekend's Dodge/Save Mart 350 at Infineon Raceway. The following is a transcript of the interview.

Tickets for the event can be purchased by visiting www.infineonraceway.com, at the Infineon Raceway Ticket Office, located at Highways 37 & 121 Sonoma California 95476 (On Race Days: The Ticket Office is open from 7:00 AM to Half Hour After Event. On Non-Race Days: The Ticket Office is open Monday through Friday from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM.) or by phone from Ticketmaster Charge-by-Phone by calling 707.528.TIXS • 415.421.TIXS • 510.625.TIXS.

Can you explain to the average fan the difference in strategy between racing on an oval and a road course?

We always talk about track position on ovals, but it's never as important as at a road course. Part of the strategy used to be just staying on the road course, but now the cars are better and the drivers have more experience. Pit strategy is key. The track is so long, that you hope when you're on pit road the caution comes out. Everywhere else you hope caution falls so you can come into the pits. You have to plan your own fuel mileage window. Other than that you just run as hard as you can to start in front and stay in front.

What's it like for you to come back to the Bay Area?

I love that. I was born and raised in Vallejo, and I have lots of family and friends in the area. It's great to have a chance to see them. The busy racing schedule doesn't allow me to do that any other time. I have a get-together planned with my biological father's side of the family. When I was growing up I didn't have a chance to enjoy the Napa Valley like I do now.

Tell us about trading paint with (Formula One driver) Juan Pablo Montoya. It looked like you were having a ball.

It was so, so awesome. It was an experience I'll never forget. I'm still blown away I even had the opportunity to do that. I don't know if it's going to help me at this road race, but it was something I've always wanted to do. I've been a fan of Formula-1 for a long time and I knew once I went NASCAR racing, F-1 was something that was never going to happen. If we'd had more time, I think Juan could've definitely helped with our set-up. It was really more for fun, instead of serious testing. The car he drove was an older road course car for us. The car we won six or seven road courses with. We did some real testing at VIR a couple weeks ago, and we learned a few things that should help us this weekend.

You've had great success at Infineon Raceway. Do you feel you've got some sort of advantage on road courses that you keep to yourself?

When you go to a track and feel successful there so much of it is in the setup and the way the driver drives the track, so you go in there with confidence knowing that you can be successful even though the competition is getting better. You have the confidence that you know how to get the car around the track, and that it just takes fine tuning, rather than miles to get what it takes to win. I definitely carry that with me going into Infineon Raceway, our goal is to go back there and make sure we don't have any failures.

You're currently in third place in the Winston Cup points standings, do you feel the road course is a good place to earn some championship points?

Third place is a good place to be. Matt Kenseth has a pretty good lead out there, and Matt's such a well-rounded driver, it doesn't seem like they have any one area where they have a weakness. This weekend will be a good test for Dale Jr., but it is a race weekend where if we do everything right we can gain some points on those guys. We're third in points and I'm happy with that, but I know we're going to have to step up our performance on a more regular basis to catch up with them.

A lot of drivers are resistant to road courses, why do you think they feel that way?

Those are the guys who are never going to win a road course race. I know that from the beginning I didn't have a lot of road racing background, and I always love the challenge. The first year I was in Sonoma, I was in the tire barrier, but it was something I've always enjoyed and wanted to get better at. Just a couple years later we were winning on the road courses. I think that goes for all the tracks we go to. If you got to a track with a negative attitude, you're not going to be successful there. But, if you go in with positive attitude, you'll improve. Some guys just don't have the knack for downshifting and turning right.

How much undiscovered talent do you think is out there on the country's dirt tracks?

So much. There are so many people out there, so many talented people who may just not get noticed or have the backing to take it to the next level to get recognized, or just don't happen to meet the right people at the right time. The talent is out there. Sometimes it's just pure luck, sometimes it's just pure determination. For me, I was lucky because I had my step-dad who really helped me with the driving and the desire, and the know-how to find people to give me the opportunity. For me, it was just pure luck and experience. A guy at a racing school I attended had the race car, asked me to run a few laps in his car, and I did, and he wanted to put me in the car at the end of the year.

When you burst on the scene, NASCAR was beginning to take over a more national level, and you received some criticism for that. Your thoughts?

This sport was going through a huge growth period at that time, and I was fortunate to be on the scene at that time. I gained a huge amount of support outside of the core group of fans at the time, but I still took a lot of criticism from the core group. Sometimes the ones that boo are the ones who make the most noise. But you also know that there are people out there who are huge fans of mine and my sponsor that have kept the group growing.

You had some on-track incidents this year, do you think this is due to more aggressive driving?

Aggressiveness and stupidity. I think that the competition has certainly closed up in recent years, so track position is extremely important. You're driving harder to maintain position, and then when you get the opportunity to gain, you drive harder and above to get the position. Due to hard racing and the harder you drive, the easier it is to make a mistake. Anytime you do anything "over the top" it's easier to make mistakes. I make mistakes, learn from them and move on.

Do you apologize to other drivers after on-track incidents and do you worry when you see Sterling Marlin in the rearview mirror?

We're going to be racing together for a while, and you hope guys move on. Getting into wrecking competitions doesn't do anyone any good. Who knows, with the recent events I might give a little more than him (Marlin). The difference with our series is that we're racing the same guys 38 races a year, and 36 races are for points.

Can you talk about Richard Petty's 200 wins and how that ranks in sports history? Is there any chance of someone breaking that record?

Nobody's ever going to get close to it. It's not even possible. His record in modern-era wins is still pretty amazing. It's always going to get harder and harder to win. Take a guy like Kurt Busch. He certainly could win eight races at the most this year, but I'll be surprised even if that happens. And that's a guy who's on top of his game right now. I get to race these cars every weekend and I know how difficult it is. Petty's record isn't just a record in our sport, but all of motorsports.

Can you explain why Dale Earnhardt's legacy continues to be so strong?

It's hard to say. I think that he came along when the sport was going through a growth spurt, similar to when I came along, but the fans who locked on the sport were guys who could relate to a guy like Dale. He loved his cowboy boots and his country music. He

was a great guy, but on the racetrack he played the evil role a little bit. He did everything that people loved. You either loved to hate him or you loved him. You can't deny what he did for the sport. When you're that good and you've got the rest of the package to go along with it, you're going to get a lot of admirers. Our fans are very loyal to begin with, and they're going to support him forever.

How do you prepare for a road course? Is there any substitute for being on the course?

It was really nice and refreshing to test at VIR. To get in the car and get on the brakes, do the downshifts, get used to turning right, get the loads on the left side of the car and get more familiar with how the car moves around. Most of the preparation is in the car itself. When you've had success like we've had, I can get very familiar with the track right away. It's the finetuning of the car that's the biggest key.

What did you learn after your equipment failure at Infineon Raceway last year?

After last year, we went through all of the rear-end gears and we found a weakness in the metal. It was almost too thin in the area that broke on us. We went back and started getting more consistency in our rear-end gears. It allowed us to do a better job checking and inspecting them before putting them in the car. We shouldn't have the same problem ever again.

Is it satisfying being competitive or would you rather be out there winning races?

I'd love to be winning as much as I was four or five years ago, but the sport's changed as well and you don't see guys winning like I used to. The most important part of every season is being in the hunt and running for the championship is the most important thing. The two kind of go hand in hand, but you're going to choose the championship over a win every day.

On competing for the championship, are these two road courses a big opportunity for you to jump back into a much better position?

Absolutely. I look at it as an opportunity. I don't go out there expecting to dominate, but I know it's a race we can win and have been very strong at. I think we've made some gains. Last year, I was surprised how well we did there because we struggled at Watkins Glen. I think what we've learned in testing will show when we come out to Sonoma this year. As much success as we've had, and with very few failures, and I look at putting a really solid effort together out there.

You seem to have less trouble than some other drivers making passes at Infineon Raceway. What's your secret?

I just try to start up at the front on qualifying day. It is extremely hard to pass, and at Infineon there are one, maybe two places where you can pass. You can take some risks in

one or two other areas, but it's really difficult. We've had really good racecars, and there are certain areas where you set up to go fast and to pass.

There seems to be more on-track aggression this year than in past years, why do you think this is?

Certainly the young guys bring to the racetrack an aggressive driving style and less patience, but you can get away with it because the cars are stuck to the track better and the tires are better. Contact happens at any track you can't pass on, so you start to use your bumper to make the passes. Now you're starting to see it on the bigger tracks, which you don't really want to see. You hope guys have more respect for each other than that.