

Four-Time May Take The Fifth With New Crew Chief

Guest Column By Cathy Elliott

Anyone who still believes NASCAR has an off-season hasn't been listening to the news.

Just three days after the organization won its fifth consecutive NASCAR Sprint Cup Series championship with driver Jimmie Johnson, Hurricane Hendrick flattened the racing community.

Hendrick Motorsports announced that three of its four Cup Series superstars would be working with new crew chiefs next year. Jeff Gordon will work with Alan Gustafson and the former No. 5 team, while Mark Martin will move over to the former No. 88 team to work with Lance McGrew. There will be no change for Jimmie Johnson, who will remain with Chad Knaus.

And Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s new home will be in the former No. 24 shop, as he is paired up with Steve Letarte in 2011.

The crew members, explained team owner Rick Hendrick in a press conference on Nov. 24, aren't going anywhere. "We're not shifting teams and putting guys in different buildings. We've got guys that are working together; they are still working together. We're just changing the drivers and the teams," he said.

The immediate response was also the most predictable: it's all about Junior, who finished 21st in this year driver standings and hasn't won a race since June 2008.

Now, Mr. Hendrick won't come right out and admit Earnhardt's disappointing season facilitated the change. In fact, he flatly denied it, saying, "This was not a move we made because of Dale or his situation. All those factors weighed into it, but I looked at the personalities, and the strong traits of each team and each crew chief and each engineer and then looked at the drivers and looked at starting to do something to make

a change to pair up people that I thought would be better together."

Still, the obvious conclusion is that Junior is NASCAR's most popular driver by a country mile, and the sport becomes the beneficiary of fans' largesse when he is winning, or at least threatening to win. They watch more, they spend more, and they care more.

But I have this little nagging voice in my ear, the same one that obsessively counts carbs and offers the opinion that a functioning smoke alarm is a better investment than a 27th pair of black shoes.

The voice is annoying, but it's usually right, and right now it's suggesting to me that perhaps this goes a little deeper than what is glaring at us from the surface. All the smoke is billowing around Junior, but maybe the hottest fire burns somewhere else.

Because Jeff Gordon hasn't been looking all that happy lately.

Back in 2001, when he won his fourth Cup Series title, Gordon was seemingly unstoppable. He was the wonder boy, the young phenom who claimed his 50th career victory in fewer races than any other driver in history. He won four championships in seven years. Hendrick Motorsports may not be the "house that Gordon built" in the strictest sense, but he surely spruced the place up.

Legend has it that when Gordon approached Mr. Hendrick about putting a largely unproven NASCAR Nationwide Series driver into a Cup car in 2002, the response was something to that effect that Rick was amenable if Jeff was willing to "put your money where your mouth is."

Gordon did indeed prove willing, and the investment has surpassed everyone's expectations. Gordon's viewpoint may well have shifted somewhat, and who could blame him? The view from the top looking down is much more scenic than the perspective from the opposite direc-



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tion. Remember that old saying about the lead dog? Jeff Gordon has been staring at Jimmie Johnson's happy tail-wagging routine for five straight years. That cannot be easy. Or fun.

Gordon has raced well, unless you equate good racing with winning. The wins have been scarce. As with Earnhardt nation, it has been drought season in Gordon country, which hasn't seen a win since April 2009. That's a very long time for the biggest of dogs.

Gordon's long-time sponsor DuPont has left the building as the main primary sponsor on the No. 24 car, and he has watched his protégé become, for all intents and purposes, his successor. Just to add insult to injury, when Johnson's prospects for that fifth title seemed in jeopardy due to substandard pit stops, why, he and Knaus just reached over and took Gordon's entire crew, turning

the phrase "take one for team" into a double entendre.

So it comes as no real surprise at all that in this dance of the crew chiefs, Gordon got a stellar partner. Gustafson guided Martin to a second place overall finish in 2009, and could well be exactly the right choice to inject new life into the No. 24 team and their driver, a not-so-old dog still more than capable of few new tricks.

Rolling over and playing dead would not be one of those tricks, by the way.

Junior wants to succeed, and will do whatever is necessary to make it happen. But while the rest of the world is intently watching him work so hard, jumping through the many hoops of all those high hopes for his racing future, keep your eye on Jeff Gordon. He could well prove to be the guy that ultimately gets the job done.



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