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**Nextel Cup Series**  
**USG Sheetrock 400 – Joliet, IL – July 9, 2006 – Submitted by Lady S**  
**2005 Race Winner – Dale Earnhardt Jr 2006 Race Winner – Jeff Gordon**

**Pre-race Activities**

Our first review is of course with Jimmie Johnson as he is the current leader of the points. This is the smallest points lead but he is going to keep working to get to the Chase for the Cup. Wow, that was some breaking news! Then we have a quick interview with Matt Kenseth who is currently second in the points. What is his focus? He has 2: 1) try to win races and 2) and he doesn't care about leading the points until Homestead. Then we had an interview with Dale Jr (as the defending winner of this race). He is happy with his car. Tony Stewart was next on the interviewee list. Now, this one was odd. He was interviewed accepting a check on stage during driver intros. How awkward did that look? And if it was my business that was getting the plug I am pretty sure that Dave Burns is not someone I want in my photo. Tony did mention that he scoped out the fence just in case he wins today! Next up, we had a review of those drivers who are all competing to get in the top 10: Carl Edwards, Kurt Busch, Greg Biffle, Jeff Gordon etc. Out of that review came interviews with Greg Biffle. He said that they had to be careful not to lose points. Jeff Gordon looked particularly great in his Foster Grant sunglasses and said this track is a big test for him ... it is a 1.5 mile track. Then an interview of Kurt Busch. How odd is this again? Marty Snider followed Kurt Busch down the stairs onto the stage where again, a driver is receiving a check from his sponsor. Talk about poor timing. An interview with Carl Edwards ... and blah, blah, blah. Nothing new with him. A quick interview with Kasey Kahne who is looking more and more comfortable being on TV. Good hair color Kasey – not too dark and not too red. Kevin Harvick commented that he felt like a "he-man" in his car in happy hour yesterday. Jeff Burton is concerned about lack of grip during the hot spots of the day, but thinks he has a fast car. Wally's World was quite the treat with Will Ferrell riding along with Wally! In fact, Wally did donuts on the track! Ha! DW and Jeff Hammond could take a lesson or two. Ryan Newman, Mark Martin, Bobby Labonte, and Brian Vickers were some other interviews.

The pre-race ceremonies followed. Diana DeGarmo (American Idol semi-finalist) provided the singing for our National Anthem. The whole "rockets red glare" was a little messy, screamed and just all over the place. A B-52 (not the band but an airplane) provided us with the flyover.

Will Ferrell (Ricky Bobby) and the cast from Talladega Nights gave us the command to start engines.


**Pace Lap**

It's a mile and a half track. This has proven to be the nemesis for Jeff Gordon. Will he find a way to get around this track to maintain his position near the top10? It is a late start to the race today, which means the track will be slicker until later towards the end of the race when it might be just a bit cooler and tighter. Will the drivers and crew chiefs make the right changes? And yesterday, we saw that fuel mileage made the difference as did being out front and in clean air. This will put a lot of pressure on the teams – gasmen, crew chiefs and drivers.

**Driver Drama**

It was clear that the driver drama of the day was between the #17 Kenseth and #24

	<p>Gordon. The TV replays showed that on Lap 265, #24 Gordon got into the back of the #17 Kenseth when it appeared that #17 Kenseth either let up on the gas, checked up or something. The #24 Gordon was certainly closing fast and for whatever reason, it looked like #17 Kenseth slowed ever so slightly. While the NBC booth of Wally Dallenbach, Benny Parsons and Bill Webber agreed that the contact was not intentional, Matt Kenseth (who must have had that Nextel Fan View in his car) was certain that Jeff Gordon dumped him. I would also add, as I listened to my Trackpass here at home, Jeff Gordon did not come on his radio after the contact. Silence, in this case, was golden.</p>
<p><b>Best or Worst Driver Performance</b></p>	<p>I have to say that the best driver performance today was #41 Sorenson. This guy pulled out a 7<sup>th</sup> place finish and he did it not by some strategy type of call, but by sheer driving his guts out. There were several points during the race that it was clear that #41 Sorenson was going to be someone to contend with by the time the race was over. What he needed though, to get in the top 5, were long green flag runs and those were in short supply during the last half of the race. Also, props to #8 Earnhardt Jr who started 25<sup>th</sup> and finished 5<sup>th</sup>. He managed to lead 27 laps and was a force to contend with on long runs too. But again, the cautions at the end didn't help him at all. The worse performance was the #26 McMurray car. He started 40<sup>th</sup> and finished 39<sup>th</sup>. And people, he wasn't involved in any accident on the track. He just ran that badly – all day. I am sure that Jack Roush is wondering if he made a good move bringing Jamie McMurray over from Gnassi when really, what had Jamie done at Gnassi but win 1 Cup race ... while subbing for Sterling Marlin?</p>
<p><b>Most Notable Pit Stop</b></p>	<p>Here are a few highlights regarding our pit stops today:</p> <p>On Lap 57 - #06 Kluever, starting in his first Cup race, made a rookie mistake when he came in under green. On the way down pit road he managed to pick up the orange commitment cone. Needless to say, he was penalized with a drive-thru penalty.</p> <p>On Lap 124 – #8 Earnhardt Jr pits and wanted an adjustment made to the car. Tony Eury Jr refused to make the change but by the time Jr came down pit road for his pit stop Eury Jr agreed to do the change that Dale Jr had asked for or so we thought. Come to find out on lap 214, the change that Earnhardt Jr wanted, was never made. This was discovered only when Jr asked his team if the changes had been made because the car didn't feel right. Uh-huh, a driver always knows.</p> <p>Under Caution #4, the pit stops were going to be the key to winning this race. The #17 Kenseth, #20 Stewart and #24 Gordon all pit and get filled up on gas. This would be the last time they pit. The #17 Kenseth and #20 Stewart will eventually run out of gas before the checkered flag flies. Even coming out of this caution, #24 Gordon was going to be 2 laps short on fuel. But #24 Gordon managed to save just enough fuel to get to the extended race end.</p>
<p><b>Best or Worst Crew Chief Call</b></p>	<p>We had a lot of different strategies being played out today. We had pit stops with 2-tires, 4-tires, fuel only. It was a mixed bag of things that at any given time, were good decisions. I can't think of any particular call that stood out above the rest.</p>
<p><b>Cautionary Tales</b></p>	<p>Caution #1 – Lap 68 – Debris. NASCAR was just as bored as the rest of us since we had been green the entire race to this point.</p> <p>Caution #2 – Lap 139 – Debris. Again, the field had gotten too strung out ... NASCAR was forced to do something. A caution is called to save everybody.</p> <p>Caution #3 – Lap 172 - #44 Labonte lost an engine.</p> <p>Caution #4 – Lap 199 - #96 Raines spins into the infield. Doesn't hit anything.</p> <p>Caution #5 – Lap 216 - #38 Sadler spins off track after a tire goes down after contact</p>

	<p>with the #16 Biffle.          Caution #6 – Lap 229 - #55 loses a tire when he had contact with the #12 Newman.          Caution #7 – Lap 234 - #42 Mears got loose all on his own and spins around and into the wall.          Caution #8 – Lap 265 - #24 Gordon got into the #17 Kenseth and spun the #17 Kenseth around.          Final Lap as they crossed the finish line: #17 Kenseth and #40 Stremme got together and #17 Kenseth spins around, hits the wall.</p>
<p><b>Turning Point</b></p>	<p>Well, I think that most people will argue that the #24 Gordon spin of the #17 Kenseth on Lap 265 was the turning point of the race. I would argue that was not the case at all. With 15 laps to go, Jeff Gordon was behind by about 1.5 seconds. It was from that moment on, Jeff was gaining a 1/10<sup>th</sup> to 2/10ths of a second on 1<sup>st</sup> place Matt Kenseth. By 5 laps to go, Jeff was there... on Matt Kenseth's bumper. Although, it would be true that the spin just about guaranteed a win to the #24 Gordon team. I would also argue that the turning point(s) were the final 4 caution flags. This is where, in my opinion, Jeff Gordon won the race. Steve Letarte kept preaching to Jeff to save everything he could (gas) under caution, but to "go after it" under green. Jeff Gordon did just that. Jeff Gordon won.</p>
<p><b>Victory Dance</b></p>	<p>Jeff Gordon wins the USG Sheetrock 400! He does the obligatory donuts on the frontstretch and then, in true bad fan fashion, beer cans, bottles and other miscellaneous crap was being hurled at Jeff Gordon's car. Could it have been because Wisconsin is so close to Chicago and Matt Kenseth fans were still mad in the stands? Who knows ... and really, who cares? Those "fans" need to get a grip and get out of the stands. In victory lane, we finally got to see our driver actually drive into victory lane and get out of his car --- all without going to a commercial! Way to go NBC. On his exit from his car, Jeff Gordon gives us his usual "whew-hew!" and gets a hug from his crew chief Steve Letarte. Now, Jeff was looking pretty whipped and after he was handed his bottle of Pepsi, he took a rather large swig of that puppy! And then took another one! I thought for sure we were going to hear Jeff Gordon burp on TV! Jeff looked very excited as Chicagoland is only 1 of 4 racetracks where Jeff had not won. He can now mark this one off his list. Jeff Gordon also apologized to Matt Kenseth and went on to say that Matt Kenseth had blocked him several times in those closing laps.</p>
<p><b>Lug Nut Rating™</b></p>	
<p><b>Television Coverage</b></p>	<p>Well, we are back to our old NBC crew. One added feature that we had was a review of the pit stall selections for each of the teams. They did a little review of the pros and cons of the pit stalls. I liked it a lot!</p> <p>A few of the stupid awards they give during the telecast included:</p> <p><b>The Ford "Bold move of the race"</b> was for Matt Kenseth's loose car condition. What the heck was bold about that? So, he thought he had a tire going down and was thinking about coming in, does that really constitute a bold move? Isn't that just called racing?</p> <p><b>Allstate "Good Hands award"</b>: To the #12 Newman who was sandwiched between the #55 Waltrip and #07 Bowyer. Like, really sandwiched so much so that both of the cars on either side of #12 Newman were rubbing tires with #12 Newman. It was this action that caused caution #6.</p> <p>We had a new commercial for Federal Express. The letter from a Denny Hamlin fan</p>

	<p>was “What does Denny Hamlin like to do to relax?” The response was “fish”. Next we see is Denny Hamlin riding by in a super speedy boat making such a large wake it tosses a smaller boat and it’s people overboard!</p>
<b>Post Race Thoughts</b>	<p><b>Post race interviews:</b> #48 Johnson – he said his car was edgy and that he gained and lost spots during pit stops as they changed 4 tires each time. It is what they have to do to get to stay in a solid position for the Chase for the Cup. #8 Earnhardt Jr – he was happy with his 5<sup>th</sup> place finish. #17 Kenseth said that the contact with #24 Gordon was intentional. He went on to say that the contact was a payback from the altercation he and Jeff had at Bristol earlier in the year. Kenseth did pay Jeff Gordon a compliment stating that Jeff Gordon was a smart guy and wouldn’t do a ‘pay back’ the week after being put on probation by NASCAR after Bristol. No, Matt Kenseth said that Jeff was smart to wait several weeks to make the payback happen. Sounds like sour grapes to me. At least Matt Kenseth admitted that he probably would have run out of gas anyway.</p> <p><b>Post Race thoughts:</b> This is not one of my favorite tracks on the circuit. Too many long drawn out green flag runs. I normally consider Chicagoland a Roush track even though Roush has not done well here if you’re looking at the number of wins or top 5’s but Matt Kenseth always seems to be the bright spot for Roush here ... but never seems to be able to close the deal. Jeff Gordon is now 1 race away from tying Dale Earnhardt Sr for most wins in his Cup career. If this race means anything for the Gordon camp, he may well surpass Earnhardt Sr before the year is over.</p>