

Jeff Gordon Has Thirst for Fun at Delaware Brewery

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Jeff Gordon celebrates his victory after the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series Pure Michigan 400 auto race at Michigan International Speedway in Brooklyn, Mich., Sunday, Aug. 17, 2014. (AP Photo/Bob Brodbeck)

MILTON, Del. (AP) — Jeff Gordon may as well have been any average sports fan, sliding up to the bar and ordering a beer.

But for a guy who has mastered winemaking as well as he has winning races, Gordon needed a remedial course on the finer points of handling a cold one.

"Do you smell the beer like you do with wine," Gordon asked.

He raised the glass to his nose, inhaled the fruity complexity and pungent hoppiness of a Dogfish Head 61, and started to drink.

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One sip turned into two sips. And with a few more swigs, Gordon was suddenly the Delaware version of TV barfly Norm Peterson.

"I could drink this all day," Gordon said, to the delight of the Dogfish Head staff.

Gordon has been soaked in champagne in Victory Lane three times this season. He's sipped wine from his private stock at Jeff Gordon Cellars.

After a personal tour of one of the top craft breweries in the business, Gordon was willing to make 24 stand for more than the number on his car — he could use a case of the good stuff to lug back to North Carolina.

"I think I have a new appreciation for a good beer," Gordon said, laughing.

Gordon has had plenty of hops in his step this year, enjoying a career renaissance with Hendrick Motorsports that has him with three wins and a spot in the Chase for the Sprint Cup championship field. He's coming off a win Sunday at Michigan International Speedway that thrust him to the top of the points standings. Gordon, who fueled retirement talk at the Daytona 500, has backtracked from any thoughts about hanging up the helmet.

He looks every bit a title contender — and his cars are as stout as some of the dark, roasty and complex beers Dogfish stirs up.

"I feel like we're the best team," Gordon said Wednesday.

So do the folks at Dogfish Brewery.

Gordon toured the brewery (with beer in hand) and lunched at the brewpub (complete with a five-beer sampling flight) to promote the Sept. 28 race at Dover International Speedway.

Dogfish is widely considered the top of the field, the Jimmie Johnson of the east coast craft beer scene. It's No. 1 and always the beer to beat. Victory Brewing, Yards Brewing and Flying Fish would make up the rest of what could be considered the Hendrick Motorsports of craft beers.

Gordon seemed as interested in the ingredients that go into brewing beers as most fans would be at an inside racing tour at the Hendrick shop.

Forget fuel tanks. Tanks and tanks of beers, enough to satisfy the palate of all the race fans at Dover, filled the brewery.

Dogfish founder Sam Calagione led Gordon on a personal tour of the complex and they startled the rest of the public who had their routine stroll turn into so much more. Many fans were left with their mouths agape when the four-time NASCAR champion walked by with his safety goggles on.

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"I had no idea he'd be here," said fan Gary Cancrow, who snapped a quick picture. "He's my favorite driver, too."

Gordon found some comparisons between a successful brewery and a race team.

"When I look at this, I think somebody's going to buy that beer, or buy that by the case, and for us, we have a facility that buys our engines and engine parts but we don't link it to a person, we link it to a performance," Gordon said.

Calagione said Hendrick and Dogfish always had to be at their best to stay on top.

"I'd say both of our company's are equally obsessed with engineering and performance," he said. "Ours is a lot more based with smaller customers while Jeff is all about sponsors."

For all the star power Gordon brought to Delaware, he was only the second most famous celebrity to tour the brewery. Former Led Zeppelin singer Robert Plant found a whole lotta love with the beer when he notched his name as Dogfish's head frontman.

Gordon is again a contender to win this weekend at Bristol. He wins at Kansas and the Brickyard 400 to go along with Michigan. He has 91 career wins and his fantastic season has put 100 in sight.

"It's great to play a role in the results on Sundays and know my guys believe in me," he said.

He's again established himself as a top contender for the championship, and his first in the Chase era.

Retire? Maybe if his achy back finally gives out for him. But he expected to have a longer shelf life than any mass produced beer.

"I don't believe in retirement," Gordon said. "I believe in the next step in life."

Against the backdrop of local favorites like Shrimpys Snack Shack and Go Fish, Gordon made it down to the boardwalk to meet about 300 fans for a Q&A. The Delaware natives had little use for Gordon's thoughts on the revamped Chase or night racing at Dover. They wanted to know, what about some Dogfish sponsorship on the No. 24 Chevrolet?

Pennsylvania-based Yeungling Brewery has stepped up of late for Austin Dillon. But Dogfish wasn't willing to spend the big bucks on Gordon, yet.

"I don't know if we can hang with that," Calagione said.

Gordon skipped the beer to dump a bucket of ice water over Calagione's head as part of the Ice Bucket Challenge. Gordon brought wine from his private stock, swapping some cabernet and chardonnay from 2007 (of his Ella label) and 2010s (of

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son, Leo) for some Delaware beer.

Gordon preferred the Namaste, a Belgian wit crafted with oranges, lemongrass, coriander and peppercorns.

Sounds good, especially after a victory.

But Gordon wasn't ready to commit to home brewing quite yet.

"The beer business would have been fun to get into," Gordon said. "But I like wine."

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