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NASCAR

Robby Gordon Wins First at New Hampshire

Loudon, N.H., Nov. 23 — The really and truly *final* race of the endless 2001 NASCAR season had at least the element of the unexpected, with Robby Gordon, always unpredictable, becoming the 19th driver to win this year and the fifth to win for the first time.

Gordon, who will go full-time in Richard Childress's No. 31 next season, drove the Lowe's car to victory in his 62nd NASCAR start, giving team and sponsor their first victory in five years of trying. Lowe's, which migrates to Hendrick's next year, thus leaves RCR with a pleasant handshake and at least one good memory.

Friday's New Hampshire 300, postponed from Sept. 16 in the aftermath of the criminal attacks on New York, will evoke less-pleasant memories for Jeff Gordon, NASCAR's champion-elect, who led, pretty much without a challenge, for 254 of the 274 (of 300) laps.

Over the final 50 laps, however, Bobby Labonte and R. Gordon worked into the competitive mix, along with Sterling Marlin and Tony Stewart, second-best throughout the cool, sunny afternoon.

The excitement began when J. Gordon, who had built a 2.5sec lead over Labonte, had to brake hard for the car of Elliott Sadler, who had slowed for entry to the pits. That let Labonte close up, then take the lead on Lap 258 when lapped Kevin Harvick, on newer tires, passed Gordon inside to open up the lane.

No problem, or at least not yet. Gordon passed Labonte back three laps later, with R. Gordon following inside Labonte. The cars held positions until

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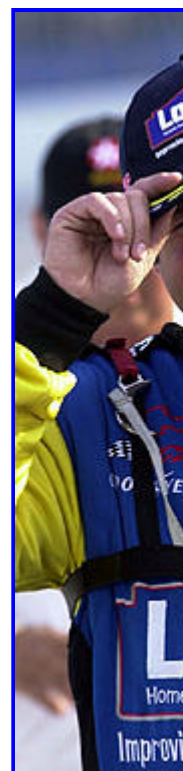
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Robby Gordon was the unexpected winner of the season-ending New Hampshire 300 at New Hampshire International Raceway. (Photo: LAT Photographic)





caution came out on Lap 271, for Ricky Craven's blown tire and wreck in Turn 3.



Marlin vaulted to the lead with a fast stop, ahead of R. Gordon and J. Gordon (no known relation, as most are aware). Robby then pulled by Marlin on Lap 282, dragging Jeff along behind him. Jeff took the lead on the next lap when Robby was caught behind the swerving lapped car of Kyle Petty, Jeff going by on the outside.



Hell broke loose (really, more like "heck") on Lap 285, when the Gordons and the lapped car of Mike Wallace got caught in a squeeze in Turn 3. Robby chose perhaps the wrong moment to put the horn to Jeff, and Jeff's car lurched rightward into the car of Wallace, sending Mike spinning to the wall. That brought out caution.



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Jeff was as mad as you'll see him, racing around to catch Robby on the back side after the yellow, then hitting him square and hard enough to lift the rear of the 31 off the ground. For that, NASCAR flagged its four-time champion for a lap, dropping him to 16th after a sure-fire day's work. The champ finished 15th.



Robby scooted around the action on 285 and led off the restart with 11 to go. With a cushion of three lapped cars between himself and second-place Marlin, he coasted to an easy victory.

The Gordons had clearly different views of the decisive events, with Jeff certain Robby had pushed too hard. "Absolutely," he declared. "There's no doubt in my mind. See, everybody thought you couldn't make me mad, but you *can* make me mad.

"It was between him and me anyway. I just wish it would have been done fair and square instead of just knocking a guy out of the way. We had some lapped traffic to go through, and you've got to be patient, I don't care if there's 15 laps to go."

Robby, freshly feted and digitized from victory lane, shrugged it all off. "It's what they call racing," he explained. "I didn't wreck him. I can see if I had wrecked him and [he had] hit the wall, but he still had a car good enough to win the race.

"He took himself out of the race. Once he ran into me, if he didn't wreck me, I knew there was no other car out here that was as fast. I got into him a little bit. I didn't spin him, I just moved him up the race track a little bit.

"I knew we had to get through those lapped cars

because Jeff was better on long runs and we were better on short runs."

Marlin finished second, Labonte third, Matt Kenseth fourth and Stewart fifth.

Gordon's season has been as erratic as his career, with u-turns and detours all around the compass. He began the season as unlikely driver for hapless Morgan-McClure; that lasted five races. He was spotted next in June at Sears Point, driving Jim Smith's No. 7 car; he nearly won except for a late-race conflict with future teammate Kevin Harvick.

Childress picked up on Gordon after hard-luck Mike Skinner, driver of No. 31 since 1997, broke his leg in a crash at Joliet, Ill. He pinch-hit for Skinner the next five races and nearly won at Watkins Glen, except that a TV battery in the car blew up with less than 20 laps to go.

When Skinner was released after Dover, Robby got the No. 31 full-time, although the official announcement of his hiring did not come until Atlanta last week. In between, he failed to qualify at Charlotte and Atlanta and missed the Homestead race because of a previous commitment to the Baja 1000 desert-truck race.

After all that, he came up a winner in Friday's finale. Given all that (and that is just *this* year's tale), Childress and crew could be in for a wild time next year.

Richard wasn't much worried about all that Friday. "What can you say about Robby Gordon?" he enthused. "A lot of people wondered, why Robby? I think today proved that he's not only good on a road course, but he has a tremendous amount of talent. If we keep a car under him, he's got the talent to win a lot of races."

Gordon's previous best finish on a NASCAR oval was seventh at Phoenix four weeks ago. His two CART victories came on the oval at Phoenix and on the street course in Detroit, both in 1995, with Derrick Walker. He also won four consecutive GTO/GTP class victories (1993 through 1996) in the Rolex 24 at Daytona.

As far as keeping a car under Gordon, a shrewd call last week by crew chief Gil Martin kept Robby in the game.

Goodyear, anticipating colder weather than the 50deg readings Friday, changed from the round rocks it had

planned to bring to the softer, sticker set used at Martinsville. With the track warmer than expected (and with NASCAR allowing just 45mins of practice in the chilly early morning), the right-side tires blistered badly through the first 150 laps.

As the track warmed, the sealer wore off, and teams got their cars adjusted (including remounting heat-cycled tires from previous sets), the problems diminished, but by that time Robby had gotten a good jump. Chief Martin had decided to bring leftover sets of Martinsville tires, which had had a couple extra months to cure and harden, as a hedge against warmer weather.

The 31 team thus had fewer problems, allowing Robby to make up ground from the 31st starting position, especially over the second half.

"It was just according to how the car was and how the balance was," Martin said. "If you were tight, you were losing a right-front. If you were loose, you were losing a right-rear. As we went to the [older] tires, we still had some of that, but it wasn't nearly as bad. We were able to go about 60 laps [on tires] there at the end, and I think that was the difference. We were able to push that from 40 laps to closer to 60 or 65."

What little excitement remained concerned the top 10 in points. Stewart held onto second, despite finishing three places behind Marlin, who took over third from fast-fading Ricky Rudd. Dale Jarrett ended up fifth (see top 10 listing below).

Special mention should go to Brett Bodine, who with his half-funded team finished eighth Friday, his best of the season and second top-10 all year. Bodine, last of the owner-drivers, needs big money to stay in business next year.

New Hampshire 300 Results:

- 1) Robby Gordon, No. 31 Lowe's Chevrolet, 300 laps
- 2) Sterling Marlin, No. 40 Coors Light Dodge, 300
- 3) Bobby Labonte, No. 18 Interstate Batteries Pontiac, 300
- 4) Matt Kenseth, No. 17 DeWalt Tools Ford, 300
- 5) Tony Stewart, No. 20 Home Depot Pontiac, 300
- 6) Jerry Nadeau, No. 25 UAW/Delphi Chevrolet, 300
- 7) Robert Pressley, No. 77 Jasper Ford, 300
- 8) Brett Bodine, No. 11 Ralph's Ford, 300
- 9) Mark Martin, No. 6 Viagra Ford, 300
- 10) Dale Jarrett, No. 88 UPS Ford, 300
- 11) Dave Blaney, No. 93 Amoco Dodge, 300
- 12) Johnny Benson, No. 10 Valvoline Pontiac, 299
- 13) Ricky Rudd, No. 28 Havoline Ford, 299

- 14) Jimmy Spencer, No. 26 Kmart Ford, 299
- 15) Jeff Gordon, No. 24 DuPont Chevrolet, 299
- 16) Casey Atwood, No. 19 Dodge Dealers/UAW Dodge, 299
- 17) Jeff Burton, No. 99 CITGO Ford, 298
- 18) Rusty Wallace, No. 2 Miller Lite Ford, 298
- 19) Elliott Sadler, No. 21 Motorcraft Ford, 298
- 20) Joe Nemechek, No. 33 Oakwood Homes Chevrolet, 298
- 21) Kurt Busch, No. 97 Sharpie/Rubbermaid Ford, 298
- 22) Bill Elliott, No. 9 Dodge Dealers/UAW Dodge, 298
- 23) Kyle Petty, No. 45 Sprint Dodge, 297
- 24) Dale Earnhardt Jr., No. 8 Budweiser Chevrolet, 297
- 25) Kenny Wallace, No. 1 Pennzoil Chevrolet, 297
- 26) Kevin Harvick, No. 29 GM Goodwrench Chevrolet, 297
- 27) Terry Labonte, No. 5 Kellogg's Chevrolet, 297
- 28) Rick Mast, No. 90 Ford, 297
- 29) Bobby Hamilton, No. 55 Square D Chevrolet, 297
- 30) Jason Leffler, No. 01 Cingular Dodge, 296
- 31) Todd Bodine, No. 66 Kmart Ford, 296
- 32) Ron Hornaday, No. 14 Conesco Pontiac, 296
- 33) Mike Wallace, No. 12 Mobil 1 Ford, 295
- 34) Stacy Compton, No. 92 Kodiak Dodge, 295
- 35) Kevin Lepage, No. 7 NationsRent Ford, 295
- 36) John Andretti, No. 43 Cheerios Dodge, 295
- 37) Bobby Hamilton Jr., No. 4 Kodak Chevrolet, 294
- 38) Ricky Craven, No. 32 Tide Ford, 268
- 39) Ken Schrader, No. 36 M&Ms Pontiac, 261
- 40) Michael Waltrip, No. 15 NAPA Chevrolet, 246
- 41) Buckshot Jones, No. 44 Georgia Pacific Dodge, 138
- 42) Ward Burton, No. 22 Caterpillar Dodge, 129

Final top 10 in points, unofficial:

- 1) Jeff Gordon, 5112
- 2) Tony Stewart, 4763
- 3) Sterling Marlin, 4741
- 4) Ricky Rudd, 4706
- 5) Dale Jarrett, 4612
- 6) Bobby Labonte, 4561
- 7) Rusty Wallace, 4481
- 8) Dale Earnhardt Jr., 4460
- 9) Kevin Harvick, 4406
- 10) Jeff Burton, 4394

— Ben Blake, Senior Editor, [RACER](#) (Photo: LAT Photographic)

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