

Beat: Sports

DAYTONA 500 COULD MARK JEFF GORDONS FINAL APPEARANCE IN NASCARS BIGGEST RACE

LAST SEASON AS FULL-TIME DRIVER

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USPA NEWS - The Feb. 22 Daytona 500 is scheduled to mark Jeff Gordon's final appearance in NASCAR's biggest race, an event he has won three times. The minutes before the start of the 500 are likely to be full of intense emotion for Gordon.

Who announced recently that this season will be his last as a full-time driver in NASCAR.

Gordon has had difficulty controlling his emotions at important moments in his 23-year career. He wept in victory lane after his first Cup win "" at Charlotte Motor Speedway in the 1994 Coca-Cola 600 "" and he has cried on stage at the Sprint Cup banquet while accepting the Cup trophy. He cried while telling his team and other Hendrick Motorsports colleagues about his decision to leave the driver's seat of the No. 24 Chevrolet at Hendrick Motorsports.

Will there be tears next Sunday?

"On race day when I wake up, it might all hit me again, or when I hop in the car," Gordon said Thursday during NASCAR's media day.

"I can promise you if I win the race, that will be an emotional moment." "I'm a guy who holds things in, but I'm also a very passionate person, so when it finally builds up enough and that moment calls for it and it triggers something in my mind, then it's just like full flow." "My goal and thought process is that I love those moments," he said. "Those are tears of joy, of pride, of humble moments of seeing and hearing things from my fans and peers and the media. That's overwhelming to me. I like it. Gordon perhaps will reflect on his first Daytona 500 as next week's green flag nears. In 1993, he came within a few moves of scoring what would have been a shocking victory.

He was in the draft at the front of the pack in the closing miles, jousting with veterans such as Dale Earnhardt Sr., Mark Martin and Dale Jarrett. Jarrett ultimately won the race, and Gordon was fifth. "I was running up front, and I thought, 'Man, I might have a shot at winning this thing.' It was an 'ah-ha' moment. This is the Daytona 500 "" my first one, and I'm right in the mix. I was the only young guy. I was sitting there thinking, 'I don't belong here.'

"I remember taking the whole thing in and thinking, 'Damn, look at all those people in the grandstands. What's Dale going to do? What's Dale Jarrett going to do? What am I going to do?'"

He won the race in 1997, 1999 and 2005.

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