

Times-Herald

On the right track

Bickford, at 9, following path that led cousin Gordon to top

By TIM SCOTT/Times-Herald sports editor

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When NASCAR superstar Jeff Gordon straps into his instantly-recognizable multi-colored No. 24 car today, speeding and drafting and bumping his way around Daytona International Speedway in what has



James Bickford, 9, has already set a goal of becoming a NASCAR driver, just like his cousin Jeff Gordon. (Stacey J. Miller/Times-Herald)

truly become The Great American Race, he will have one basic prevailing thought: Win.

Yes, airtime must be gained for sponsors and championship points must begin piling up and autographs should be signed with a smile - these are the ways of a professional driver - but winning is still as pure as ever.

Because, as those close to him will say, Jeff Gordon has reached America's most popular racing circuit, and bagged its biggest races and

championship crowns, primarily by tapping the trait of hyper-competitiveness.

Listen to the man who Jeff



James Bickford, No. 4, races his quarter midget 'light B' car to a second-place finish in an early race held Saturday at the Vallejo Fairgrounds. (Stacey J. Miller/Times-Herald)

gives the most credit for his climb up all of racing's rungs, his step-father John Bickford, and it's been a gradual evolution. Since Jeff was 5.

Of course, there are others like him. That's what makes it difficult.

Forty-two others will be on the Daytona track today, speeding and drafting and bumping their way around him, or trying to. Even among this racket, of engines and colors and the 100,000 strong who will mostly root for anyone beside him, Jeff Gordon is often the best.

* * * *

When quarter midget racing standout James Bickford straps into one of his roll-bar protected, open-wheel mini-speedsters today, speeding and bumping and sliding his way around the Exposition Hall at the Vallejo Fairgrounds, in the 27th year they've been holding the Pacific Coast Indoor,

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he will have one thing on his mind: Win.

But in a precocious, inevitably cute, 9-year-old sort of way.

Still, as those close to him will say, James, whose favorite driver is Jeff, doesn't



Fellow racer Matt Scott, left, and Tom Bickford give the car a push before the race. (Stacey J. Miller/Times-Herald)

go to these races hoping to just do OK, or run kind of fast, or slow his movement up the racing ladder. He's tapping his trait of hyper-competitiveness. Since he was 5. Very much like the man he calls his cousin, Jeff.

It got started when John bought a quarter midget for 5-year-old Jeff. They lived in Vallejo then and, as the story goes, Jeff took the first turns in one of these little cars around the fairgrounds parking lot, then later ran in the races inside the Expo Hall.

Tom Bickford, John's younger brother by 15 years, was around then, too.

As Jeff's racing career progressed - because Jeff, even at that young age, clearly displayed a passion for winning and graduating into bigger fields and bigger cars - an idea evolved. Because

racing parts were, and still are, quite expensive, the brothers would build their own parts out of John's shop, Bickford Precision, a business manufacturing driving controls to outfit vehicles for the disabled.

When Jeff was 14 and his racing career was charting ever higher, John sold his house in Vallejo to help fund a race truck and trailer and a more affordable home in Pittsboro, Ind., where Jeff had more opportunities to get into bigger fields and bigger cars because of age-restriction rules then in California.

And while John and Jeff sought the winner's circle at tracks in Indiana and around the country, Tom stayed back at the shop, outfitting parts for Jeff's cars under a company they called MPD Racing (Mobility Products and Design, which John still runs today).

"Tom was right there with Jeff, working in the shop," John recalls this week, moving amidst the thousands and thousands at Daytona. "Tom's efforts in the shop allowed me to do more with Jeff. ... So Tom saw all this stuff."

It's hard to imagine a track fitting inside the Expo Hall, but here it is. Hay bales ring the small oval, perhaps 25 yards on the straightaways, and there's a whirl of engines and familiar whiff of gasoline. John and Jeff once worked their quarter midgets around this track, like Tom and James and so many others do this Saturday.

The sanctioning body for these races is the American Quarter Midget Association, based in Rancho Cordova, one of 50 quarter midget clubs among the nation's 13 regions. The cars are scaled-down versions of a midget racer, though in

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more modified forms the air-cooled four-cycle engines can produce as much as 10,000 rpms. Also, the level of financial investment is up to the family, though Tom says the Bickfords are more than serious in their involvement. The organization also stresses safety, with roll cages helping to avoid most serious injuries.

And while it's not apparent at the upper stages, with fans and media and sponsor booths there, down here it's unavoidable: this is a fathers-and-sons sport.

Like with Tom and James, the fathers serve as mechanics - with one dad saying Saturday, "get down out of there. You get to go watch TV now, while I go to work." The sons serve as drivers and, perhaps in many cases, fulfillers of their father's dreams.

And the fathers are always nearby, at the edge of the track, giving hand signals (Tom points to his temple during warm-up laps as if to say, "Be smart"), pushing the cars to get them kick-started, flipping the cars upside down (with driver still locked in) to assess current damage, gesturing to each other - shareholders in the entire experience.

Together, these families trek long distances, down coasts, across the continent, in search of the next track, next race, next win.

But like Jeff, James' passion pushes the dream. Tom says when the wins started piling up - a friend says they'll need another room to store the trophies if James keeps on racing - the investment increased as well. "He's got a desire and I'm trying to fulfill the prerequisites," Tom says.

Along with Tom's wife and James' mother, Teresa, the Bickfords had a busy 2006, racing on 46 weekends, with Tom reporting through

his Bickford Motorsports .pdf that James pulled off 68 wins in 75 junior stock races that year. They've been almost everywhere, with races in Washington and Maine and most points in between.

There's more. In Utah, at Flaming Gorge, James talks about the one that got away when fly-fishing. At Bonneville Salt Flats, also in Utah, they shot off fireworks, to James' fond recollection. In Primm, Nev., Tom asks how many times in a row James had rode the roller coaster there: "About 43," the 9-year-old laughs.

Saturday, James fearlessly and aggressively works his way through traffic - after randomly drawing starting spots near the back of the six- and five-car grids in both his "light mod" and "light B" divisions - into a pair of second-place finishes. After his second race, James - in a quick-fire play-by-play that he uses to describe crashes, races won and races nearly won - says, "Did you see that? The No. 2 car, he slowed down in front of me. He brake-checked me."

It's perhaps a slight disappointment for the 9-year-old, who Tom reports has 15 wins alone at this track, made better when James takes first in the "light B" later that evening.

But he'll be back for more today, planning to squeeze in a basketball game early in the day before heading back out to the fairgrounds for the main events, hoping to pull off more victories.

Talking of the travel, and the miles, Teresa says Friday, when the family shows up at the Fairgrounds to set up amongst the RVs and haulers and wrenching equipment, "The excitement when he wins, that's the ultimate."

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James, a fourth-grader at St. Apollinaris School in Napa, kills time between races on Saturday throwing sticks, teasing a good friend who's shown up to watch him for the first time, and touring around on a two-wheeled razor-style scooter. When Teresa brings In-N-Out, James exclaims, "Yes!"

He also plays basketball, starting for his team despite being relatively small in stature. In tackle football, he was the star running back, very fast, once scoring three touchdowns on three carries before leaving the game to get to a race, as Tom proudly reports. He's recently picked up wrestling, and plays a little baseball and golf.

Yet, he's got plenty of spoken-like-a-true-racecar-driver moments. And both parents speak of maturity for his age, a must when competing against kids sometimes six or seven years his senior.

As a car cover is pulled back, James rattles off his pair of sponsors (Red Line Oil, out of Benicia; Ziggy's Motorworks, out of Pennsylvania). When talk of racing go-karts surfaces - good for road course experience - James recalls a track burdened by too many rules for his liking ("they wouldn't let you on the gas and brake at the same time ... you couldn't bump into other cars!"). And Saturday, he reports back to Tom with his car's condition, including the frequent racer's refrain after a "B" race: too "loose."

Tom tells the story of a Sacramento-area television crew doing a story on a race out there and, interviewing James, "they did a little segment on how he has no fear," Tom recalls, because James was poking at a snake with a stick during the interview.

Another time, meeting Jeff's ubiquitous car owner, Tom recalls, "When he was in Rick Hendrick's trailer last year, with all the Dupont guys, and Rick asked him, 'Who are you going

to drive for James?' And he said, 'Whoever gives me the most money.' "

He's been in more crashes than anyone in the family can count, notably getting a bit of whiplash at a race in Topeka, Kan., though he checked out fine later, after crying and begging away from the ambulance and into the main-event race.

"He's got quite the personality," Tom says. "He's wide open, all the time."

Early on, James was known for his aggressive driving. It helped some when Jeff, hearing this, related the racing truth, "To finish first, you must first finish."

That bit of advice hasn't tempered his dreams, though, when talk turns to plans for his next moves up the racing ladder.

"I want to get into a bigger, faster car with a thousand people, not just parents, in the stands," James says with a wide grin.

John Bickford is now the Vice President, General Manager for Jeff Gordon, Inc., overseeing "just about everything Jeff doesn't want to do," he says with a chuckle, before preparing to return a call to Kuwait for another opportunity coming Jeff Gordon's way.

"It never stops, you look at Jeff's career, it started at 5 and hasn't stopped yet," John says. "For Jeff Gordon, the opportunities have never stopped coming to him.

"Every time he'd succeed a little bit ... it's just been a constant evolution."

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When Jeff came into John's life, an opportunity was created for the both of them.

"I kind of had a chance to live my childhood through him, because I always wanted to race," John says. "It's just two of us, that's the thing. . . What happens is your dad is working on that car, he carries an equal of responsibility ... So you've got two teammates with two different kinds of jobs.

"It really brings fathers and sons together ... it makes for a lifelong-type thing."

So James and Tom are looking into the next rung, adding go-kart road-racing to James' skill-set, getting into the mini-NASCAR Bandolero cars later this year, then Legend cars later in James' early teens.

That means more DVDs for long road trips, bigger and faster cars to race, crash and fix, larger and higher hopes. And, naturally, more money and more sponsors and more parts for Tom to build and work on and buy. More memories, and play-by-play from the son.

"My most competitive (race) was in Topeka ... right after I got whiplash ... oh my gosh!, it was so hard . . . 10 laps to go, I was in second ... (another driver) comes up behind me and hits me ... and smack!"

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