

I met Jeff Gordon!

By Judith Emmerich

Who would have believed that becoming a NASCAR fan would have provided so many exciting experiences! Especially being a Jeff Gordon fan!

I was fortunate enough in September of 2003 to become the proud owner of one of the most coveted Jeff Gordon souvenirs ever made – #304 of 2,424. That is right, the 2003 Limited Edition Chevrolet Monte Carlo SS.

While most fans dream of getting a hat, diecast car or postcard autographed, my dream was to get my car signed by Jeff himself. While that was a tall order based on Jeff's celebrity, I was determined to make it happen.

We began by making contact with Maggie Akers who worked for The Jeff Gordon Network at Hendrick Motorsports. Over the next two years, we came close several times – I got my certificate of authenticity and a diecast replica signed – but was unable to meet Jeff and close the deal on the car. That was all about to change in 2006.

On October 11, 2006 while enroute to Charlotte North Carolina for the NASCAR race; we made our annual pilgrimage to Richard Childress Racing in Welcome North Carolina. There we would meet our friends Larry Hartle (gasman for Jeff Burton) and Chocolate Myers (curator of the Dale Earnhardt Museum, previously gasman for Dale Earnhardt). Donna Duffy approached Michael in the gift shop and inquired if we were the owners of the Jeff Gordon Monte Carlo in the parking lot. She is the webmaster of the Jeff Gordon Monte Carlo website that also includes a registry. She is on the constant lookout for other Jeff Gordon Monte Carlo owners to add to the registry. She asked, "Are you here for the Jeff Gordon signing?" "What signing?" was his reply. She said, "Jeff Gordon will be signing ten Jeff Gordon Network Fan Club members Monte Carlos at the 24/48 shop tomorrow". He informed her that we did not know anything about it, could she tell him more. Donna said to talk to Chrissy or Haley and they might be able to do something for us. We were planning to go to Hendrick Motorsports tomorrow to hook up with Maggie, so we decided to go right away, as we were not far and it was still early afternoon. We thanked Donna and headed out. We were unable to make contact with Chrissy or Haley but we were able to meet and talk to Mike Helton (president of NASCAR). We were also able to meet for the third time Chad Knaus (crew chief for Jimmy Johnson) – which is another story in itself.

The following day we arrived bright and early to meet up with Chrissy Gallagher. We asked her if there was any way we could be included in the signing. We explained that we had been working with Maggie (who Chrissy replaced) for the last two years and while we came close several times, it hasn't worked out. As a matter of fact, when I told Chad that we are still working on getting Jeff to sign our car, he said, "You mean you haven't gotten that car signed yet? I thought you would have had it done by now".

Chrissy explained that they have already chosen the ten cars for Jeff to sign. They are chosen from applications submitted by fan club members. While we are members, the fan club does not cater to non-US fans, and as such, we seldom check the website. This is why we didn't know about the new fan club signing policy. She would, however, see if they could fit us in and would let us know in one hour. She made no promises.

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We took this opportunity to head over to the Joe Gibbs' Racing Busch Series garage, namely the Rockwell Automation car driven by Denny Hamlin. Michael works for Rockwell Automation so we like to take advantage of the privileges we enjoy and the friendship we have with Dana Moore, the Busch garage administrator. While there, we borrowed a garden hose and washed the Monte Carlo, just in case.

After an hour, we decided to head over to Dale Earnhardt Incorporated (DEI). Heading up I77 north, our phone rang. Chrissy said that she was able to squeeze us in. I could not believe it; I was shaking so hard! We quickly did a u-turn and headed back to Hendrick Motorsports for 12:30 pm, the appointed meeting time. It was quite the sight to see the other ten Monte Carlos arriving into the parking lot.

While Michael was outside detailing the car, I went into the lobby of the 24/48 shop and was excited to see Mr. Rick Hendrick. I quickly went back outside to get Michael and the camera. I headed back inside to get in line to meet him. I had the pleasure of speaking with him and told him that I was here for the Jeff Gordon signing and I hoped to be able to get his autograph on my car as well. He asked, "Is your car here now?" I said, "Yes, it is in the parking lot right now." "Lets go" he replied, and he accompanied me out to the car where he sat in the passenger seat and signed the visor. That was my first unforgettable experience, which surpassed all of my expectations.



So nice to meet you, Mr. Hendrick.



Inside the 24/48 shop.



Signing the passenger visor.



Outside the 24/48 shop.

It was now time to be escorted into the 24/48 trailer-loading bay in preparation for Jeff Gordon's appearance. Prior to Jeff's arrival, we were treated to assorted refreshments and a behind the scenes tour of the 24/48 shop. Following this, we were advised of the rules of engagement and what to expect. The excitement was mounting in anticipation of Jeff's

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Eleven Monte Carlos, all in a row...



Owners posing in the 24/48 shop.

arrival. I could hardly contain myself. To say this is a dream come true is an understatement. The cheers were deafening as Jeff entered the room. He gave a nice introduction and expressed his sincere thanks to us for making such an elaborate expression of support for him. He would go from car to car, taking time to speak to the owners and sign the location they selected. Eventually Jeff came to our car. He shook Michael's hand and then came over to me and gave me a big hug. I couldn't believe it! The photographer was ready to take a picture of Jeff and the car with its owners. Michael stepped aside and Jeff asked him "Aren't you going to be in the picture?" I said "No way", which made Jeff laugh. Michael took another picture of the two of us. At this point, Jeff took note of my fingernails, which I had painted blue with red flames before we left Cambridge. He thought that they looked pretty "cool".



I am so excited to meet you!



Handshake is just not good enough...



Where is Michael?



Your nails look cool!

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Jeff then accompanied me over to the driver's side of my Monte Carlo and sat down into the seat. I sat on the sill and we chatted while he signed the driver's visor. Once finished, we continued talking casually. I said, "Will you think of me when you get into your car for qualifying this afternoon". He said, "Yes Judith, I will think of you".



Signing the driver visor.



Good luck qualifying, yadda, yadda, yadda

After the signing was complete, I made sure that I was the first person to sit onto the driver's seat after Jeff. It was quite the sight to see eleven Monte Carlos roll out of the garage. I was overcome with excitement for the rest of our trip. I was constantly asking Michael to put down the visor so I could see the autograph, even when it was cloudy! Every year we head down to Charlotte or Bristol and it seems to get better and better. I don't know how we will ever top this trip!



Signature on driver's visor.



Signature on passenger's visor.

