

Lone woman works her way up racing ranks

■ Tina Gordon got hooked while watching her husband a few years ago. Friday, she made her Busch debut.

By **DAWN REISS**
Times Staff Writer

DAYTONA BEACH — Growing up, Tina Gordon chased the boys and pelted them with pine cones.



Tina Gordon

I was a tough girl.

"Right after I got married, my husband, Gary, ran into a guy who told him I used to whip him with these pine cones and they tore the whole side of his face up."

Little has changed.

Gordon is still a tough girl chasing the boys around, except there aren't any pine cones to throw, just her purple Ford No. 39 race car.

While Gordon, 35, doesn't want to make a fuss, the self-professed one-stoplight woman is turning heads. Gordon started racing after seeing her husband at Green Valley Speedway in Gadsden, Ala.

She sold her insurance business to make her love of racing a

FLORIDA CALENDAR

Major events around the state:

SEPT. 12: Grand American, Homestead-Miami Speedway. Tickets: (305) 230-7223. Web site: www.homesteadmiamispeedway.com.

NOV. 19: Craftsman Trucks Ford 200, 3:30, Homestead-Miami Speedway. Tickets: (305) 230-7223. Web site: www.homesteadmiamispeedway.com.

NOV. 20: Busch Ford 300, 1, Homestead-Miami Speedway. Tickets: (305) 230-7223. Web site: www.homesteadmiamispeedway.com.

NOV. 21: Nextel Cup Ford 400, 1, Homestead-Miami Speedway. Tickets: (305) 230-7223. Web site: www.homesteadmiamispeedway.com.

reality.

She started getting noticed in 2001, when she qualified fifth at 182.947 mph in a Ford Thunderbird at the Food World 300 ARCA/Remax Series.

Gordon is the only woman to lead in points among NCTS rookies, the only woman to race in the Trucks series at Lowe's Motor Speedway and the only woman racing full time in one of NASCAR's top three series.

After racing half a season in Trucks, Gordon now is the only full-time Jay Robinson Busch driver, a long way from her "powder puff" short-track beginning.

She debuted Friday at the Winn-Dixie 250. Starting one ahead of last place, Gordon finished 32nd among 43 drivers despite being down five laps after having spark plug trouble.

"It was disappointing to be down so early," Gordon said. "But I did keep up with them once I got back into the race. It's going to take some time, but I think we are going to be okay."

A frustrating race won't keep Gordon off the track. Gordon had

a close call racing at Charlotte in 2002. After trying to pass, she spun out and was hit on the left side.

A bar was pushed in 26 inches, with her left foot pinned against the transmission. Gordon broke her leg, heel, ankle and toes.

A metal rod still runs from her knee to her ankle, and a plate rests in the left side of the foot.

"That was the hardest thing I've ever had to deal with in my life," said Gordon, who has a 13-year-old son, Seth.

"I had a lot of people trying to talk me out of it."

But she wouldn't give up. Gordon got a little help from 1988 Cup champion and current part-time driver Bill Elliott.

After Gordon's crash, Elliott recommended a doctor in Birmingham, Ala., who later helped her get back on the right track.

"I about rolled off the couch when he called," she said. "He told me this doctor helped him get back on track after his crash in Talladega and he thought he could help me, too."

That hasn't been Gordon's last

crash.

She still wears a brace after breaking her right leg in Atlanta this year. No matter what, Gordon wants to be known as a driver first, woman second.

"To me, it's not that big of a deal," Gordon said.

"I guess being a female and being out here racing 180 mph is kind of unusual."

For Gordon, the most difficult aspect of going from a truck to a car is restrictor plates.

"A car is a little more stable than the truck," Gordon said. "The truck is nonrestricted, so you can lift a little bit and still get back on the throttle and not lose it. Here with the restrictor plate, if you lift, you are going to go back. So you just have to stay full throttle all day or all night trying to drag a little bit of brake if you are getting a good run on somebody."

NEXTEL CUP POINTS LEADERS

Through 16 of 36 races. The top 10 through 26 races qualify for the Chase for the Championship in the final 10. The rain-delayed Pepsi 400 wasn't over at press time. For the results, visit www.sptimes.com.

Driver	Car	Points	Back
Johnson	Chevy	2,375	—
Earnhardt Jr.	Chevy	2,348	27
Kenseth	Ford	2,143	232
J. Gordon	Chevy	2,123	252
Sadler	Ford	2,067	308
Stewart	Chevy	2,043	332
B. Labonte	Chevy	2,018	357
Kurt Busch	Ford	1,993	382
Newman	Dodge	1,980	395
Harvick	Chevy	1,974	401