



Gonzalez Aims for Top - NASCAR Driver's Plan to Become the First US Hispanic Driver in the Nextel Cup Series

Gonzalez says he has a five-year plan to become the first Hispanic on NASCAR's Nextel Cup series. He was offered a ride in the Busch Series at Nazareth last month, but NASCAR officials told him he didn't have enough experience on larger tracks.

He was denied a chance to run in the truck race this weekend at Dover for the same reason.

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CHARLOTTE, NC ([PRWEB](#)) June 9, 2004 -- Gonzalez Aims for Top. Driver has five-year plan to become first Hispanic driver in Nextel Cup series.

“NASCAR officials recently invited four black drivers and one woman driver involved in the “Drive for Diversity” program to a press conference to introduce former NBA star Magic Johnson as co-chairman of the effort.

They also invited several other prominent minority drivers, including three involved in the Craftsman Truck Series, to be in the audience.

Ricky Gonzalez wasn't among them.

He doesn't understand why.

Gonzalez, a 38-year-old native of Puerto Rico, was one of 12 drivers selected earlier in the year to participate in the program designed to give minorities a better chance to succeed in a sport where most of the participants and fans are white.

He went to a NFL-like scouting combine where the four black drivers and woman driver were selected to participate in a lower level series for Late Model cars.

He was excited to be involved.

Since then he said nobody from NASCAR has contacted him, not even to offer congratulations for recently qualifying in Ohio for his first Craftsman Truck Series race.

He was particularly disappointed not to be invited for the press conference introducing Johnson.

“I really believe NASCAR is trying very hard to promote diversity,” Gonzalez said earlier this week. “They're really pushing African-American drivers, which they should. That's a great thing.”



“But there are a lot of Hispanic fans out there, too.”

According to figures released by NASCAR, of the sport's 75 million fans, more than 2 million are black and nearly 6.4 million are Hispanic.

“If it's just about promoting diversity I'm a free ticket to them,” Gonzalez said.

Gonzalez already has overcome some of the hurdles that minorities coming into the sport face. He has worked his way from running Micro Stock Cars to Legends cars to Dash Series cars to Trucks.

He has battled to convince corporate America that a Hispanic kid from New Jersey can be as marketable as Jeff Gordon or Dale Earnhardt Jr.

He has listened to prejudiced fans tell him he does not look like a racecar driver.

“Some people are just ignorant,” Gonzalez said. “They think the perception of what a racecar driver is supposed to look like is Jeff Gordon and Jimmie Johnson. That's OK with me, but there's a lot of people who don't have that cookie-cutter look who are good drivers and just need the chance.”

Gonzalez, adopted at birth, moved to the United States when he was 2. He began racing dirt bikes when he was 13 and go-Karts when he was 15.

“That began the racing bug for me,” Gonzalez said.

But it wasn't until his mid-20s that he gained a legitimate chance to pursue his passion. He spent most of the years prior to that going to college, playing his saxophone and guitar in bands and running a hobby shop.

“I thought I was going to be a rock star for the longest time,” Gonzalez said.

That changed once he climbed into a Micro Stock Car, a car about the size of a go-Kart with a five horsepower engine.

“I was amazing,” Gonzalez said. “It was like a light switch was turned on, and this is what I wanted to do. In 1995 after running Micro Stocks, I told my friends and everybody I was going to be in NASCAR in five years.

“They're like, “Yeah, yeah. Sure.” Not knowing anything about sponsorship or that stuff, I started trying to figure a path to do that.”

Gonzalez bought a Legends car in 1997 and began racing fulltime the next year. He won his first feature event in his third race.

From there he went to late model trucks and then to the Goody's Dash Series, now the IPOWERacing Dash series.

He made his NASCAR debut in 2002 when he finished 14th in a Dash Series race at Greenville-Pickens Speedway. Because of limited funds and sponsorship, he was able to run only three events after running more

than 30 in the truck series the year before.

“Most of the divisions I ran before the Dash series I could run out of my own pocket,” Gonzalez said. “When I hit the Dash Series there was a lot more traveling and the tire bills were higher. Getting corporate America to believe in you and get some backing was very difficult.”

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Gonzalez's goal this year is to run seven to 10 truck races. He has entered two, missing the field at Martinsville by one spot and finishing 26th at Ohio after qualifying 21st.

“We got to run 245 laps out of 250,” he said. “I was pretty happy with that.”

But Gonzalez will not be satisfied until he reaches NASCAR's top level.

“The level I'm at now pretty much the driving skills are just about even,” he said. “It's all about the right combination of team and equipment, and it's hard because these teams don't want to give you a chance.”

“A lot of these teams are about money, what can you bring us. I try to say, “Listen, right now the Hispanic market is wide open. If I can be out there I know we'll get sponsors.”

By DAVID NEWTON
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Please visit www.rickygonzalez.com. For additional information on Ricky Gonzalez, including media kits and sponsorship opportunities, please contact Maureen Rafferty, MOTOvation Motorsports Marketing (908) 904-8028 or mrafferty@rickygonzalez.com



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