



Respecting HISTORY

Retired driver remains 'hero' to 'Little E'

Earnhardt Jr. raids vault of NASCAR movie classics

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

Atlanta
Dale Earnhardt Jr. is the face of NASCAR's present and future, but a big part of his heart is in the past.

He says he is proud of every trophy he has won at some of the newer tracks across the country, but his most treasured victories have come at the sport's old speedways where he once roamed the infield with the little die-cast cars while his dad, the legendary Dale Earnhardt, raced.

He bought his first racing movie at a souvenir trailer when he was a kid tagging along with his dad.

"It had old footage of the '70s," he said. "That was when I really wanted to know more."

So he has obtained an amazing collection of racing films from that era, and he studies them to learn everything he can about the sport's early days.

The love for the old footage is so strong that Earnhardt is starting a production company. He plans to become the narrator for the old films, and the Speed Channel is negotiating for 10 episodes.

Earnhardt said he's excited about sharing his interest with NASCAR fans.

"A lot of fans, if they're like me, can't get enough of the past, and a lot of the new fans probably want to know what the sport was like," he said, adding that for today's fans to truly understand the sport, a history lesson is in order.

"When you take history class, you're not just taught about the past five years and the present day," he said. "To tell what's happening today, you've got to know the story from the beginning."

Earnhardt thinks NASCAR was never better than in the 1970s, when legends like Cale Yarborough, David Pearson and Richard Petty were in their prime, and independents like Frank Warren and Cecil Gordon — and sometimes Earnhardt Sr. — filled the field, hoping for breaks that would make them frontrunners.

"I liked the way the cars looked then," Earnhardt said. "I liked the tolerance from good to bad in the field and how big a difference it was. It's the most interesting era of this sport."

Through the years, he has studied numerous films, carefully dissecting the moves Pearson and Petty and Yarborough and Bobby Allison used to beat up on each other.

"That was the best tool just to figure out who raced who, and how who raced, and get an idea of the mentality of Cale Yarborough and David Pearson, specifically," he said, adding that Yarborough impressed him the most.

"I bet Bobby Allison won't be happy to hear this, but if I'd been 20 or 30 years old watching races back then, I'd have probably pulled for Cale," he said. "He was willing to do whatever it took."

Earnhardt has other heroes from



DAVID TULIS / Cox News Service

Dale Earnhardt Jr. may very well be one of NASCAR's stars in the 21st century, but he has a profound respect for the sport's formative days in the 1970s.

the past, including Jimmy Means, Jim Vandiver and Coo-Coo Marlin, who always seemed to be able to push their inferior equipment to the front at Talladega and Daytona. He liked Ray Elder, the sport's original road course "ringer," who won two Cup races on the old road course at Riverside, Calif.

"It was cool to have their names pop up there," he said. "Back then, the same four or five guys were racing up front, but every once in a while, somebody would pop up in what you knew was not as good equipment and have a decent run."

Early in his Late Model career, Earnhardt actually raced against one of the old stars, when 1978 Talladega winner Lennie Pond, who retired from the Cup series in 1989, showed up for a 1995 race at Carolina Motor Speedway.

"We ran side by side for a little bit," Earnhardt said. "I broke a right front wheel and crashed right in front of him, but that was awesome. I couldn't believe I was racing against Lennie Pond. I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't. He'd won Talladega [17] years before."

Earnhardt would like to learn more about his grandfather, Ralph

Earnhardt, who died of a heart attack in 1973, the year before Junior was born. The enduring image of his grandfather comes from — naturally — old racing footage he watched years ago with his dad.

"Granddaddy ran second to Fireball Roberts or Curtis Turner or somebody that was a regular Grand National driver, but they got thrown out and they gave Ralph the win," Earnhardt said. "They actually interviewed him and asked him what he thought about it."

Ralph Earnhardt inherited the victory when the apparent winner was disqualified for using wheels wider than the rules allowed.

"Granddaddy said, 'Well, they told us in the drivers meeting that you couldn't run those wheels, so I guess it was wrong for those guys to do that.' That was the first time I'd ever seen his mannerisms, or seen him speaking, talking, walking. And to watch the look on Dad's face, to see it after it had been so many years since Dad had seen him alive. That was really amazing."

"The Intimidator" also passed on to his son an appreciation for the old tracks, many of which have been lost to time.

Father and son once went to the site of the old Ontario Speedway in California, which was razed after the 1980 season.



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DALE EARNHARDT JR.



MEANS

Dale Earnhardt Jr. says that none of the older drivers are closer to his heart than Jimmy Means, a relatively unknown driver who raced from 1976 to 1993.

Means, who ran 455 Cup races without a victory, now owns his own struggling Busch team and has an interest in a start-up Cup team. But few newcomers to the sport even know his name. He can roam the garage at will, rarely bothered by an autograph or interview.

Earnhardt talks with him often.

"He was my favorite driver besides my father," Earnhardt said. "It was amazing to me how he did everything with nothing."

Earnhardt said he and Means' son, Brad, who fabricates race car bodies for Nextel Cup teams, used to wander the garage during races, picking up new spark plugs and supplies cast off by the richer teams and taking them to Means' trailer.

"Jimmy maybe didn't even need it, but I was a fan of Jimmy, so it was cool for me," Earnhardt said. "But Brad probably was doing it because he thought his dad needed it."

Like others in the sport, Earnhardt was heartened in October of 1987, when powerful team owner Rick Hendrick offered Means one of his best cars for the 500-mile at Lowe's Motor Speedway.

Means had caught Hendrick's eye at Richmond the month before, when he drove his underfunded Pontiac into the lead on three occasions before running out of new tires and finishing eighth.

Means didn't disappoint in qualifying. He was fifth fastest in the Chevy that had been driven earlier that season by Tim Richmond.

Earnhardt, 13 at the time, watched the race from his family's condo overlooking the track.

"They started the race and Jimmy was driving like he was in his own equipment," he said. "He was taking it easy, fell back a couple of spots, just riding there."

Then came the wreck that ended any hope Means had of parlaying the one-shot deal into a career break.

"There were probably 15 cars in the wreck," Earnhardt said. "Daddy was in it. A bunch of cars wadded up."

Earnhardt wasn't too bothered that his dad crashed, but seeing Means wreck had a profound effect on him.

"I cried and cried and cried," he said. "I just couldn't believe it. A man dug so hard for so long to have a chance like that. How could this world be like that? It hurt me for a long time."

Means said his heart was broken, too. "It's a shame something else didn't come out of it," he said. "But that's life."

Earnhardt said watching Means' trials and tribulations was eye-opening.

"I've got a lot of respect for him, and maybe some way, somehow, just by knowing Jimmy and having spent some time close to him has helped me appreciate things a little more," he said. "Maybe I wouldn't have turned out on the good side that I did."

Likewise, Means has benefited from knowing Dale Jr. He can take satisfaction in the fact that after all these years he's a hero's hero.

"[Earnhardt] is not ashamed to say that I was his hero growing up," Means said. "I'm just amazed that he would still think of me in those terms. It means a lot to me."

— Rick Minter, Cox News Service

'Preseason Thunder' to begin next week

Cox News Service

Test sessions for the 2006 Nextel Cup Series season begin next week at Daytona International Speedway in preparation for the season-opening 48th annual Daytona 500 on Feb. 19.

Those Nextel Cup teams that finished the 2005 season with an odd number of owner's points will be testing Jan. 9-11. Teams finishing the 2005 season with an even number of owner's points will be testing Jan. 16-18. All Craftsman Truck Series teams will be testing Jan. 13-15, while all Busch Series teams will be testing Jan. 20-22.

As part of NASCAR's "Preseason Thunder," fans can watch the January testing sessions from the Oldfield Grandstands, located just outside of the Daytona USA complex near the track.

Also part of "Preseason Thunder" is the annual Fan Fest at Daytona. Events include fan forums, bands, show cars, pit stop demonstrations and various displays.

Here are the Fan Fest dates:

- Jan. 10: Nextel Cup Fan Fest
- Jan. 13: Craftsman Truck Fan Fest
- Jan. 17: Nextel Cup Fan Fest
- Jan. 21: Busch Fan Fest

Admission for the Jan. 10 and Jan. 17 Nextel Cup Fan Fest dates is \$15, while admission for the Busch and Truck series' Fan Fest events is \$10.

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