



VILLAGER THINKS TEAM SWITCH GIVES EARNHARDT BOOST HE NEEDS TO WIN

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By Katie Evans

He's back.

That's all Silky Meegan could think to say about Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s win in Thursday's Gatorade Duel at Daytona International Speedway.

"I think everybody had doubts about him last year," Meegan said, still sounding giddy about Earnhardt's win. "I think he's shown everybody all he needs is a good car and a good owner and he's on his way."

Earnhardt is two-for-two in races with his new company, Hendrick Motorsports. He also won the Budweiser Shootout last Saturday.

If Earnhardt can win the Daytona 500 on Sunday, he'll be the first driver to complete the Budweiser Shootout, Gatorade Duel and Daytona 500 sweep.

Meegan doesn't think there's anyone more deserving of the accomplishment.

"He worked really hard last year and got zip," she said. "He really deserves it."

Earnhardt said he feels like he's got a good shot at winning his second Daytona 500 title, though he said it won't be easy.

"The Daytona 500 is a long, long race and so many things happen in that race every time, good and bad," he said. "You just have to take it as best you can and hope that nothing is going to take you out of the race."

"You can do things to have a better shot at winning, but the 500, you just have to run it all day long... you've just got to be there at the end," he added. "I know how tough it is to win that race."

Meegan is more confident than Earnhardt about his chances of winning.

In fact, she thinks the switch to Hendrick Motorsports from his late father's company, Dale Earnhardt Inc., is going to mean positive changes all around for the 33-year-old driver.

"Hendrick is so supportive and nurturing as an owner, and that's really what he needed," Meegan said, noting a change in Earnhardt already. "He doesn't have that scruffy face he had last year."



"I think he's molding character as well as learning as a driver," she added. "This is going to be a match made in heaven. I am just so pumped."

Meegan said she's been an Earnhardt fan from early on in his career, taking notice of him because of her love of his father, Dale Earnhardt, Sr., who died in a crash during the final lap of the 2001 Daytona 500.

"When Junior started racing, you could see that he had that talent his dad had," Meegan said. "It was just, 'OK, another generation, he's going to do great.' He's just a nice guy, down to earth, no pretense."

And though right now Meegan's Earnhardt fan gear is outdated – sporting his No. 8 clothing from his DEI days instead of his new No. 88 – Meegan said it's been a thrill to watch Earnhardt head into the 2008 season running strong.

"I was sitting in the edge of my seat for the Budweiser Shootout," Meegan said. "This one (Gatorade Duel), you just knew he was going to win. I just jumped up and down."

And watching Earnhardt's reaction to his preseason success has been thrilling, too.

"His face when he won the Shootout, that was the most joyful face I think I've ever seen," she said.

And Earnhardt has given Meegan and her daughter, who lives in Arizona, something to bond over despite the distance between them.

"I call her at the end of every race," Meegan said, and Thursday was no different. "I called her immediately and went, 'Woo hoo,' and then hung up. That's all you need,"

Meegan said her daughter doesn't have cable, so she loves being able to fill her daughter in on the good news when Earnhardt wins.

"That's really nice contact that we have with her being so far away," she said.

As she comes off her high from Earnhardt's victory Thursday, Meegan is counting down to the 500, which she'll be attending with other members of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club.

The club will be heading to Daytona on Saturday and Sunday, and Meegan plans to update her Earnhardt gear Saturday so she can be sporting the green 88 on the day of what she hopes is a victory for Earnhardt.

"I'm just excited and pumped and woo hoo," Meegan said. "Let's go racing."