

Return of 3

Racing fans in The Villages react to Earnhardt's number back on track

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By Steve Trivett



John Raoux / The Associated Press
Austin Dillon walks by his car in the garage area after he won the pole position during qualifying for the Daytona 500.

To “3” or not to “3” – that is the question.

When Richard Childress – one of the biggest names in NASCAR – announced that the famed No. 3 Chevrolet, last driven by the late Dale Earnhardt Sr. in NASCAR’s top series, would be returning to the track for this weekend’s Daytona 500, the reactions were louder than the roar created by the muscle car without a muffler.

The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club share their reactions about No. 3's return:



"I wasn't a big Earnhardt fan, but I'm happy to see the number out there again. I just hope (Austin Dillon) can do something with it."

— **Glen Carter**,
Village of Summerhill



"Everybody is big on No. 3, because of Earnhardt and because he's a legend. But there are a lot of other guys who are legends, too, and their numbers are still out there."

— **John Agiolo**,
Village of Glenbrook



"It's Childress' number and he can do with it what he wants. But it did take some nerves to bring it back."

— **Paul Barth**,
Village of Belle Aire



"In one way it probably should be retired, but in another, there have been a lot of other great drivers and their numbers haven't been retired."

— **Bob Watson**,
Village of Del Mar



"It's OK, but I hope they paint it a little differently. If it's the exact same paint job, that might be too much."

— **Gary Civiletti**,
Village of Buttonwood



"I was there on the safety crew when Dale Sr. got killed. But NASCAR has bigger problems than this."

— **Jim Hedlund**,
Spruce Creek South



"I don't really care, but it is a pretty smart marketing thing to get the fan base from No. 3 back."

— **Gary Hafer**,
Village of Summerhill



"It's going to be very emotional to see the car on the track. I expect a few people will shed some tears."

— **Mike Anderson**,
Village of Tamarind Grove



"It's Childress' right, but I understand that a lot of people are going to be upset."

— **Jim Boyd**,
Village of Caroline



"I think it's awesome that 3 is going back. It keeps Dale Sr.'s memory alive."

— **Mike Heinke**,
Village of Alhambra



"If it was any other owner, NASCAR might have made him keep it retired. I have mixed feelings about 3 coming back."

— **Tom Herrmann**,
Village of Country Club Hills

— Steve Thwaitt / Daily Sun

Childress, the car owner and one of the most successful car builders in the long and storied history of NASCAR, turned the No. 3 over to his grandson, Austin Dillon, for this year's edition of the Great American Race.

And Dillon put the car on the pole during Sunday's qualifying, turning the fastest lap with a speed of 196.019 mph.

Still, many fans of Earnhardt Sr., the iconic driver who was killed in a final-lap, final-turn crash at the 2001 Daytona 500, wanted to see the number retired to honor him much the way Major League Baseball did when it retired Jackie Robinson's No. 42.

Others believe having the number active on the track honors the legacy left by one of NASCAR's brashest, biggest talents.

Childress has owned the No. 3 since 1976 and decided this was the year to return it after refusing to run it in the sport's top series since Earnhardt Sr.'s death.

One of the loudest critics was Earnhardt's mother, Martha, who said in an interview earlier this year, "I have mixed feelings because I was told that I would never see No. 3 on the track after Dale died," she said. "I can understand it to a point.

< Note: Jim Hedlund is not a member of The Villages Motor Racing Fan < Club. He is a member of the club's Hall of Fame, Class of 2009.

"I know it was Richard's number when he drove and this is his grandson, and I understand that. As long as they don't make it look like (Dale's car). If they painted it a different color ... I can sort of deal with it, but I don't want to see the black No. 3 just like Dale's. But that's not my decision."

But the car is an exact replica of the car Earnhardt was killed in – the paint scheme will change a little depending on sponsorship – and Childress said he has gotten Martha's blessing since the decision was announced.

"She and I talked yesterday," Childress said the day before his grandson won the pole during qualifying. "Everything is great."

Childress also said that Earnhardt Sr. himself once had said before he was killed that he wanted to see the No. 3 continue to race.

"We (Childress and Earnhardt Sr.) were in Daytona and it was raining and we were talking about his retirement and what he was going to do – I think it was in 2000 – and he told me, 'I want you to keep

running this car, I want you to keep running the 3, and I want you to be able to win races and win championships,” Childress said.

Dillon drove the No. 3 in both the Camping World Truck Series and the Nationwide Series before making the jump to the Sprint Cup Series this season.

And other than Martha’s initial reaction, Childress has received support from other members of the Earnhardt family.

Dale Earnhardt Jr. has been a vocal proponent for the number coming back, but has said that the car is sure to cause an emotional upheaval among some – both his father’s fans and those who loved to hate Dale Sr. because of his racing style.

“I’m sure that’s got to stir up a lot of emotions for a lot of different people,” Dale Jr. said. “Some will be stronger than others, and that’s just up to the individual.”

Villagers John and Kathy Nolen are two of those individuals.

Not only were they big fans of the man nicknamed “The Intimidator,” they purchased a limited-edition replica of Earnhardt Sr.’s black Chevy and refitted it right down to the last decal.

“It was awesome watching Dillon win the pole,” Kathy said. “We were happy that he was out there in the No. 3.

“It’s been enough time and we always knew that there would come a day when it would return to the track.”

John and Kathy in the past even got Dale Sr. and Childress to sign the dashboard of their car – and just missed getting Dillon’s autograph last year.

“We were at Daytona last year and he was right there,” Kathy said. “And we didn’t know it was him.

“We’ll get him to sign it the next time.”

The next time probably will come at this year’s Coke Zero 400, which will be held July 5 in Daytona.

“That’s my birthday,” Kathy said.

John said he’s also OK with the number coming back, and that the couple will be headed to July’s race.

“We’ll probably take the car over then,” he said. “Now that the No. 3 is back, we’ll have to keep it polished up again.”

Especially the part of the car that carried the No. 3.

“I know that Dale Sr. would want the 3 out there,” Kathy said. “That’s more than good enough for us.”



Peter Travers / Daily Sun
Kathy and Johnny Nolen, of the Village of St. James, stand beside their Dale Earnhardt model 2000 Monte Carlo in 2012.

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Clarification

■ An item published on page B8 of the Feb. 20 edition of the Daily Sun contained incorrect information about Jim Hedlund, who recently attended a breakfast with several members of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club. Hedlund, who lives in Spruce Creek South, is not a member of the club.

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