

# Still NASCAR's Biggest Icon, 20 Years Later

The Villages Daily Sun

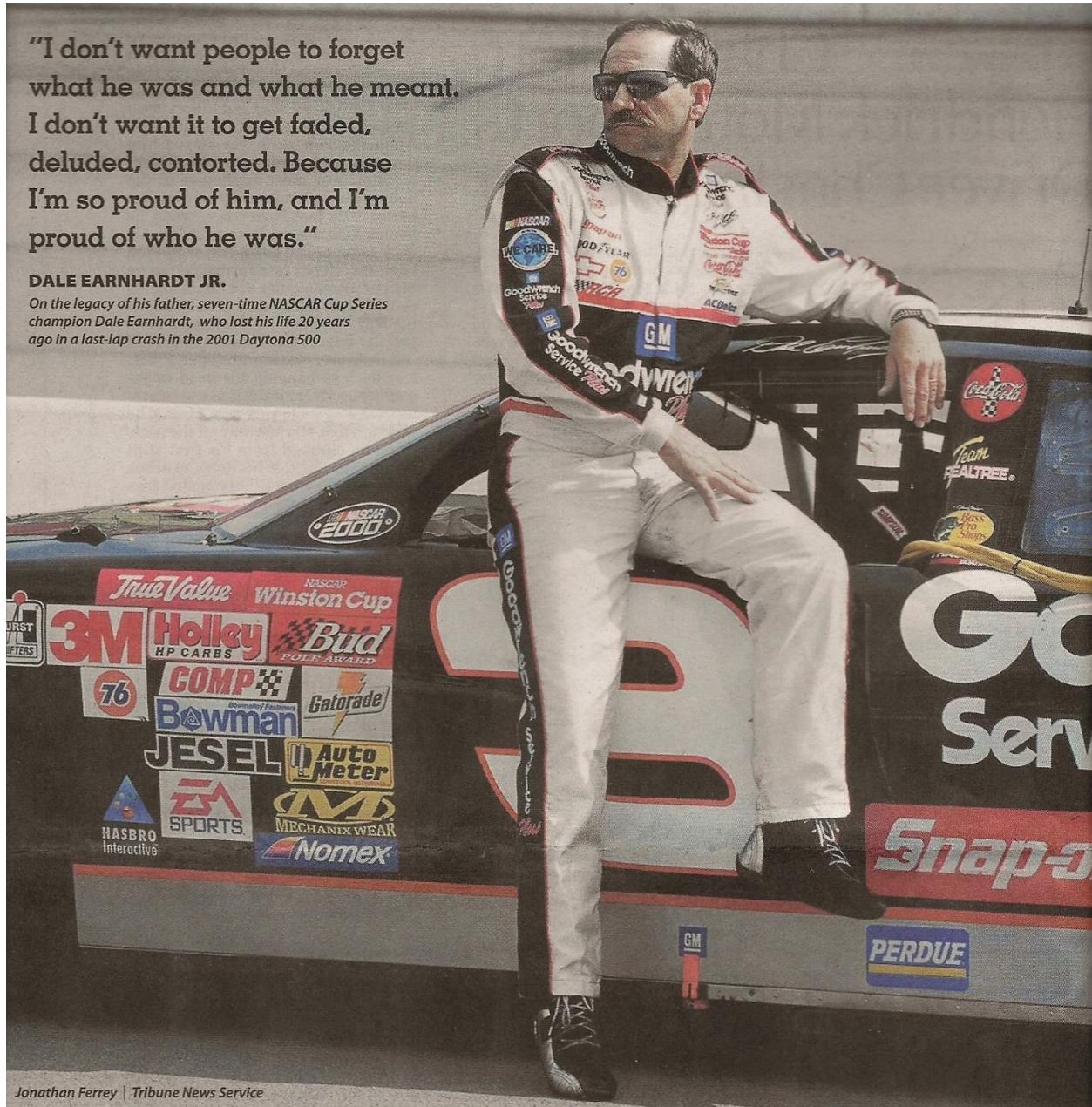
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By Cody Hills

"I don't want people to forget what he was and what he meant. I don't want it to get faded, deluded, contorted. Because I'm so proud of him, and I'm proud of who he was."

**DALE EARNHARDT JR.**

*On the legacy of his father, seven-time NASCAR Cup Series champion Dale Earnhardt, who lost his life 20 years ago in a last-lap crash in the 2001 Daytona 500*



Jonathan Ferrey | Tribune News Service

When Alex Bowman leads a 40-car field to the green flag in today's Daytona 500, Dale Earnhardt will be there. No, the legendary black No. 3 won't be zipping around the 2.5-mile superspeedway, but the posthumous legend of NASCAR's biggest star certainly will be.

Twenty years have passed since the sport lost its most beloved driver in a last-lap crash in the 2001 edition of The Great American Race.

And in the two decades since, Earnhardt's life-ending tragedy has evolved into lifesaving improvements in the sport of motor racing. From reinforced driver cockpits and redesigned race cars, to SAFER barriers and head-and-neck restraints, Earnhardt's legacy is no longer measured by seven Cup Series championships or 76 career victories – but rather zero fatalities in NASCAR's top three series since his own on Feb. 18, 2001.

"You never want to say anything good comes out of someone dying, because there isn't," said former seven-year Cup Series driver Stacy Compton, who swerved to avoid Earnhardt's final wreckage in the 2001 race. "But losing Dale Earnhardt made the sport of NASCAR safer than it's ever been. We've come so far these last 20 years, and it's all because of that day ... that Black Sunday."

## **Darling Dale**

The grittiest driver NASCAR had ever known, Earnhardt was more than just a successful wheelman.

The Kannapolis, North Carolina, native was an icon to a sport that saw its national popularity skyrocket throughout the 1990s, bridging the gap between racing's conservative Southern roots and a new marketable direction it needed to embrace.

On the track, Earnhardt dazzled fans with his lane-to-lane aggression and willingness to put his bumper where no other competitor would – often right through their own – earning the nickname "The Intimidator."

But off the circuit, his personable nature and unparalleled understanding of public relations made the grandstands gravitate toward him.

"There is still such an emotional connection, even after 20 years," said Silky Meegan, a ranking member of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club, a local resident lifestyle group devoted to all things racing. "I had been an Earnhardt fan since the 1990s, when my daughter took me to several races in North Carolina. After watching him magically move through the field, I was hooked."

Earnhardt collected 76 victories – including a track-record 34 total wins at Daytona – and a record-tying seven Cup Series championships throughout his nearly four-decade career.

"I knew him as the guy that drove the black (number) 3 car, and if he didn't win it outright, he'd knock somebody out of the way to get it done and stood in victory lane and smiled about it," said current NASCAR Cup Series driver Ryan Newman, who survived his own harrowing crash at the Daytona 500 last February that left him hospitalized with a head injury. "Unfortunately, because of the way the book ended for him, there's a different version of that legacy."

## **Fate's Final Turn**

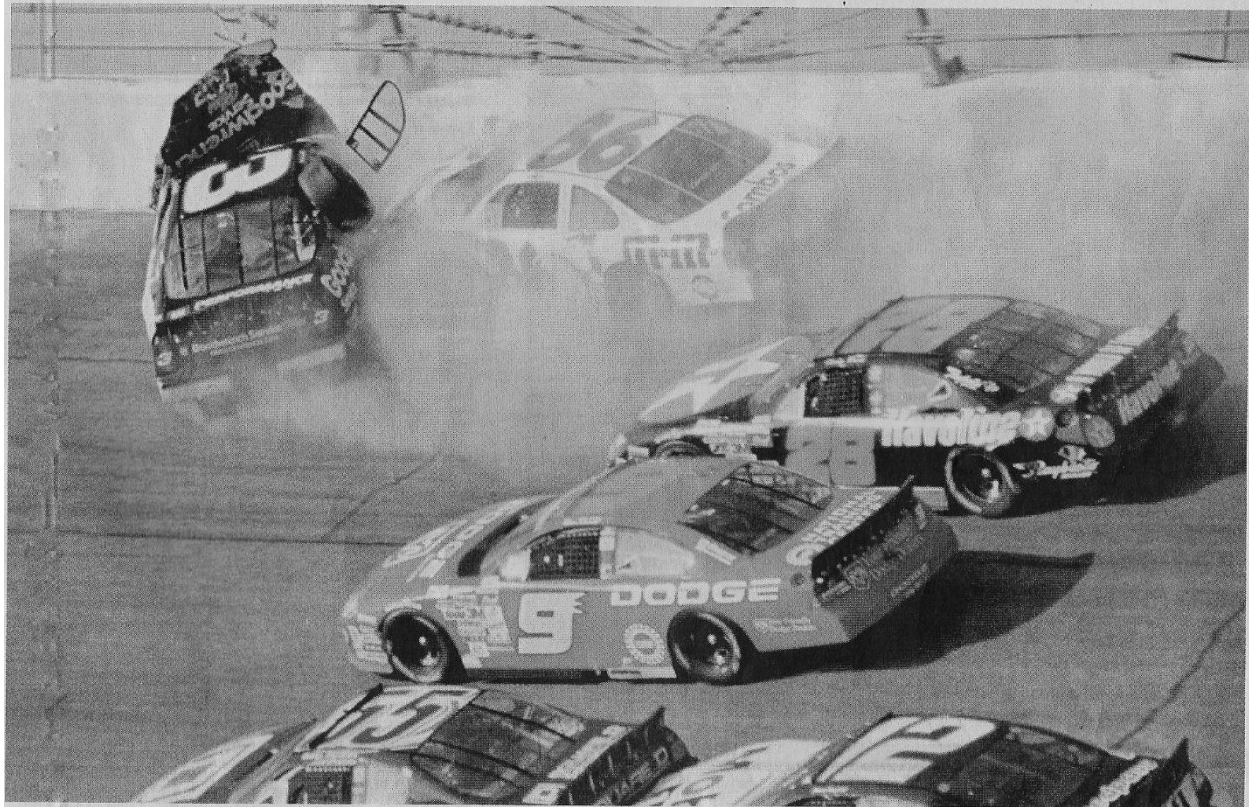
Chris Bleistein remembers it vividly, the cars barreling down the famed Daytona super-stretch one final time.

Out front was Michael Waltrip, newly added to Earnhardt's fledgling race team, Dale Earnhardt Incorporated, despite a streak of 462 consecutive Cup starts without a victory clouding over him. Behind Waltrip was Earnhardt's son, Dale Jr., leading a roaring pack of 200-mph cars on the final lap of the 2001 Daytona 500.

"It was amazing to see Waltrip and Dale Jr. leading, and then of course, there was Dale (Earnhardt) back there almost like he was protecting them," said Bleistein, president of The Villages Motor Racing Fan

Club, who was seated on the backstretch for the 2001 Daytona 500. “They fly past us and head off into Turns 3 and 4, and I watch Earnhardt get tangled up and head straight for the wall.

“I watch him hit the wall, don’t really think anything of it, and certainly don’t think it was anything tragic,” Bleistein continued. “I don’t think anyone did.”



Greg Suvino | The Associated Press  
Dale Earnhardt's window pops out of the car after being hit by Ken Schrader during the 2001 Daytona 500 at Daytona International Speedway in Daytona Beach. On the cusp of a national popularity explosion, NASCAR never stopped after the deaths of Adam Petty, Kenny Irwin Jr. and Tony Roper. But losing Earnhardt forced the stock car series to confront safety issues it had been slow to even acknowledge, let alone address. The dramatic upgrades have saved multiple lives — NASCAR has not suffered a racing death in its three national series since — and are the hallmark of Earnhardt's legacy.

## The Earnhardt crash from a driver's perspective

Stacy Compton, who finished 10th in the 2001 Daytona 500, shared his perspective of Earnhardt's fatal crash:

“Everybody's shuffling as hard as they can there with a lap to go. Michael (Waltrip) and Dale (Earnhardt) Jr. had got out front of us there, and Dale (Earnhardt) was holding his ground. Daytona is a self-cleaning race track, so when an accident starts to happen, you know the cars are going to eventually slide back down the banking. I'm two rows or so back when I see Earnhardt's car wiggle, and I see it start to go up the track. My thought was I'm so close to it, they're still headed for the wall, so I've got time to turn back down toward the apron to avoid it — and I did. I looked back up in the mirror and saw them slide back down into the grass, and I thought to myself that it didn't really look that bad. But afterward, I caught Kenny (Schrader) coming back through the garage, and he told me 'It's not good, Stacy, it's not good.' That's all he said. I'll never forget that I was on the hotel elevator when my phone rang. It was (NASCAR President) Mike Helton to tell me that Dale had passed away, and his voice has stuck with me forever.”

Neither did Compton, who drove the No. 92 Kodiak Dodge for Melling Racing, when Earnhardt's famed black No. 3 Chevrolet was clipped from behind by Sterling Marlin and then Ken Schrader. Earnhardt was then sent back up the track – in front of Compton and the rest of the field – before slamming the outside retaining wall at nearly 160 mph.

"It really didn't look that bad, and that's what makes it so difficult for a lot of people, including myself, to comprehend," said Compton, who eventually finished 10th after finding his way through Earnhardt's fatal crash. "It looked like a Daytona wreck that we've seen a hundred times and guys walk away from it without a scratch. But obviously, as we know, it was anything but that."

Earnhardt was killed instantly from a basilar skull fracture, a result of blunt head trauma after rapid deceleration from a forcible impact of roughly 60 Gs.

"It would've been almost shocking to hear that he was hurt, let alone killed, just because you've seen so many accidents that look so much worse," said Sam Patrick, another member of The Villages Motor Racing Fan club in attendance that afternoon. "To think it was 20 years ago now, that almost feels not possible."

Waltrip's celebration in Victory Lane was short-lived, after then-NASCAR President Mike Helton delivered the announcement that Earnhardt had been pronounced dead at 5:14 p.m. at nearby Halifax Health Medical Center, just a mile from the speedway.

"This place and he were one," Waltrip said of Earnhardt and Daytona. "If you're going to die ... when it's time to die, you need to go somewhere where you feel so at ease, at peace and at home."

"And that describes Dale at Daytona."

## **Everlasting Earnhardt**

A decade-and-a-half before Earnhardt was fatally injured in 2001, Jim Downing was laughed at for what he chose to wear around his neck while racing.

Along with his late brother-in-law and business partner, Dr. Robert Hubbard, Downing invented – and was the first racer to wear – a head-and-neck safety device, or HANS.

The U-shaped restraint is fitted and fastened around a driver's neck and attached to his helmet, helping stabilize the head and reduce whiplash-like effects that occur during rapid deceleration in a crash.

"Folks used to make fun of it, or say it wasn't needed or wasn't going to help, and that all sort of changed that day," Downing said. "I don't think I even ate lunch that next day because we must've talked to every news agency in America, and seemingly every race team called us up, too."

Downing said between 1991 and 2001, he sold roughly 250 of his handmade HANS devices. But from the Monday after Earnhardt's death through that following Friday, Downing fielded nearly 300 requests.

"It took a while, but finally everyone woke up and realized there were some things that could be done," Downing said. "It's just a shame (Earnhardt's death) had to happen for it to happen."

NASCAR made head-and-neck restraints mandatory for its drivers in October 2001, after 25-year-old Blaise Alexander became the fifth racer in 17 months to die from a basilar skull fracture sustained in an on-track incident.

"At the end of the day, there's no real way we'll ever know if HANS could've saved Dale Earnhardt," Downing said. "In my belief now 20 years later, I think there's a 95% or 99% chance that it would've."

"You can put whatever number or percentage you want on it, but to me there's no question that he'd have much better odds to survive it. He'd be here."

In the years that followed Earnhardt's death, NASCAR also began the installation of SAFER (Steel and Foam Energy Reduction) barriers on walls at tracks across the circuit, designed to absorb kinetic energy during high-speed impacts.

"We all know racing is an inherently dangerous sport," said Steve O'Donnell, NASCAR's executive vice president and chief racing development officer. "But our priority is safety and we'll continue to put things in place that make this sport as safe as possible."

Additionally, NASCAR has developed and put three redesigned cars into its field of competition since Earnhardt's passing, each featuring the latest in energy-reduction technology and driver cockpit safety.

The renewed focus toward innovating ways to keep drivers safe, O'Donnell said, came as a direct byproduct of Earnhardt's passing.

"The culture is what Dale Earnhardt changed," O'Donnell said. "It's our ability to each and every day talk about technology, talk about safety and continue to have people in the industry approach us about those ideas versus just how to make the car go faster."

And as 40 drivers get set to fearlessly strap into their 200-mph machines today, fully knowing the life-altering dangers that potentially await, they recognize that Earnhardt could be the reason their lives are saved should calamity claim them on the track.

"He changed so many things about our sport in so many different ways," NASCAR Cup Series driver Kevin Harvick, who replaced Earnhardt's seat for Richard Childress Racing following Earnhardt's death, told media at Daytona earlier this month. "The impact that he has had after his death on the safety of the sport has been something far greater than would have happened with anybody else."