

VILLAGERS TAKE IN SIGHTS, SOUNDS OF DAYTONA

MOTOR RACING FAN CLUB THRILLED TO ATTEND HISTORIC WEEKEND



John Kitowicz and Silky Meegan of The Villages check out the action in the Fan Zone on Saturday at Daytona International Speedway. Bill Mitchell / Daily Sun

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By Katie Evans

Speckled throughout a crowd of thousands in Daytona International Speedway's Fan Zone on Saturday were Villagers wearing yellow polo shirts with a checkered flag pattern on the collar and the tip of the sleeves.

About 40 members of The Villages Motor Racing fan club proudly wore their club shirts to Saturday's Nationwide race, the Camping World 300, saving their favorite driver's memorabilia for today's 50th running of the Daytona 500.

Cameras in hand for most, the members made their way from window to window in the Fan Zone, peering in at the garages of their favorite racers.

Silky Meegan hurried her way through the windows, excitedly making her way to Dale Earnhardt's garage, hoping to catch a glimpse of his new No. 88 car.

The only time she slowed down was when she walked by Juan Pablo Montoya's garage.

"Montoya's in there," she said, smiling. "A driver's actually in there."

After finding Earnhardt's garage empty, Meegan positioned herself where she was certain she would be able to get a picture of his car as he drove back in from practice.

"I'm gonna get it," she said, holding her camera up at her chest, ready to pull it up and snap a picture as soon as Earnhardt approached her line of sight.

Club member Dave MacTrinder has been at the Speedway since Wednesday, and is thrilled to be attending such a historic weekend.

"I was here the first time in 1967," said the Village of Santiago resident. "It's so much different than what it was that it's like being in a different country."

MacTrinder's most memorable Daytona 500 moment, he said, was in 1976, when Richard Petty and David Pearson, who were in first and second, respectively, crashed on the final lap.

"They both spun down into the infield and Pearson was able to keep his car running and beat Petty by a few feet," MacTrinder said, adding that he had expected the opposite outcome.

Heading into today's race, MacTrinder is hoping to see Earnhardt walk away with his second Daytona 500 title, and his first under his new team, Hendrick Motorsports.

Daniel Kochanski said he doesn't think there's any question on who the winner will be.

"Jeff Gordon, of course," he said.

Kochanski doesn't expect it to be close, and he doesn't expect to be on the edge of his seat, holding his breath as the cars make their way to the checkered flag.

"I believe he's going to take it all the way," Kochanski said. "It's a sure win."



Diana and Ted Cahalane of The Villages enjoy the Fan Zone festivities Saturday at Daytona International Speedway. Though Ted is more partial to Stewart, he does believe Earnhardt will walk away the winner. And the only reason he wouldn't mind seeing Earnhardt win is because it would make Diana happy.

Ted and Diana Cahalane were disappointed to find the garages of their respective drivers, Tony Stewart and Earnhardt, empty as they meandered through the Fan Zone on Saturday morning.

Exciting time

But the Village of Piedmont residents are taking in all they can this weekend while at the Speedway, acknowledging the milestone that the Daytona 500 has reached with today's race.

"It's very exciting and important to us," Diana said, joking that they probably won't make it to the 75th running of the race.

"It's amazing," Cahalane added, unable to believe it's been 50 years. "I remember seeing pictures of the first one on TV as at a very young age."

Cahalane said he's hoping that the 50th running of the Daytona 500 will be a good, clean race.

"And one of our two drivers to win," he added with a chuckle.

Though Ted is more partial to Stewart, he does believe Earnhardt will walk away the winner. And the only reason he wouldn't mind seeing Earnhardt win is because it would make Diana happy.

"I'm hoping Junior does good for her," he said. "He had such a tough time last year."

Diana said, with Earnhardt's victory in the Budweiser Shoot Out and Gatorade Duels, she's just happy to see his luck tuning around.

"I was giving him one more year to prove himself," she said with a laugh, adding that she'll be rooting for him today. "I hope he does it. I think he will."