



NASCAR Nextel Cup driver Dale Earnhardt Jr., shown being interviewed in Daytona Beach, Fla., on Thursday, predicts he'll be among the top three going into this year's Chase for the Championship.

Junior eager to improve upon last season's finish

By MIKE HARRIS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla.

While Dale Earnhardt Jr. would just as soon forget last season, the lessons he learned have him anxious to start this season.

Right now, his confidence is soaring.

"I think we're going to come into the Chase being top three in the points," Junior said. "We'll have six or seven wins this season, if not more. If we lose the championship, it won't be by much."

The third-generation NASCAR star will get his first chance to show that the No. 8 Chevrolet is going to be a leader instead of a follower tonight in the Budweiser Shootout, a 70-lap race for the previous year's pole winners and former Shootout winners.

Junior, easily the most popular driver in NASCAR, was among the favorites to win last year's Nextel Cup championship. But he won only one race and failed to qualify for the 10-race playoff-style Chase.

"You know, we learned a lot," Earnhardt said as his team prepared his car for the first competition of the season, a prelude to Sunday's pole qualifying for the Feb. 19 Daytona 500.

ON TV

A look at this weekend's televised events from Daytona International Speedway:

Today
10:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. — NASCAR Nextel Cup Budweiser Shootout practice, Speed Channel
4 p.m. — Daytona ARCA 200, Speed Channel
8:30 p.m. — NASCAR Nextel Cup Budweiser Shootout, TNT
Sunday
Noon — NASCAR Nextel Cup Daytona 500 qualifying, WTHR-Channel 13

"That was an unfortunate season that I had to experience for some reason to really get back, to really mentally get back to where I needed to be," he added. "I think now we've got a better understanding of what needs to be done."

A year ago, the Dale Earnhardt Inc. team began with an ill-advised swap of cars and crews for Earnhardt and then-teammate Michael Waltrip.

Junior began the year without cousin and longtime car chief Tony Eury Jr. or uncle and longtime crew chief Tony Eury Sr.

New crew chief Pete Rondeau lasted through May before being replaced by Steve Hmiel, DEI's technical director, as interim crew chief.

Finally, Eury Jr. replaced Hmiel for the final 10 races, and some consistent runs buoyed everyone on the team with hope over the winter.

"Working with Steve Hmiel taught me a lot," Earnhardt said. "Working with Pete, going through those changes, taught me a lot. Those people had an effect on me for the better. It was something that had to happen."

Earnhardt, who feels he's the favorite for the 500, will get an chance to show just how strong he is during the Shootout. He drew the 19th starting spot in the 21-car field that also includes reigning Cup champion Tony Stewart and defending 500 winner Jeff Gordon.

Other starters include Ken Schrader and Jimmie Johnson, starting from the front row, along with Joe Nemechek, Kasey Kahne, Elliott Sadler, Ryan Newman, Scott Riggs, Dale Jarrett, Carl Edwards, Bill Elliott, Mark Martin, Kyle Busch, Danny Hamlin, Matt Kenseth, Jamie McMurray, Kevin Harvick, Brian Vickers and Waltrip.

Meira gets lone Panther ride

By CHARLES WILSON
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

INDIANAPOLIS

Panther Racing has signed 2005 Indianapolis 500 runner-up Vitor Meira, the team said Friday.

The 28-year-old Brazilian has four career second-place finishes but never has won a race in the Indy Racing League, something he and Panther co-owner Mike Griffin hope to change this season.

Meira has "literally been two or three inches from his first IndyCar victory," Griffin said during a telephone news conference.

"If there is a team that can give me that edge, that is for sure Panther Racing," Meira said.

Meira, one of three drivers for Rahal Letterman Racing last season, will drive Panther's No. 4 Dallara Honda.

Meira finished seventh in last year's IndyCar Series standings and third in prize money with more than \$1.45 million. He finished second to Dan Wheldon in May's 500 and trailed Scott Sharp by .0779 of a second in the Amber Alert Portal Indy 300 in Sparta, Ky., in August.

In 45 career starts, Meira has 15 top-five finishes.

The Indy Pro Series (formerly the Infiniti Pro Series) begins a 12-race schedule March 26 at Homestead-Miami Speedway in Florida, and Panther expects to be there.

Tomas Scheckter, who drove for Panther last year, is driving for Vision Racing this season. Vision, which is owned by IRL founder Tony George and his wife, announced the move Thursday.

That leaves Meira as Panther's only driver, at least for now.

This year's car will be the team's first powered by Honda engines. Pennzoil Lubricants will continue as a sponsor.

Panther has won 15 races in its eight seasons in the IRL.



MEIRA

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Harvick: Someone needs to fill late Earnhardt's role

By MIKE HARRIS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla.

In at least one way, Dale Earnhardt may be irreplaceable.

Kevin Harvick, who stepped into his seat at Richard Childress Racing the week after the seven-time champion died in a crash during the 2001 Daytona 500,



HARVICK

says no one has been able to replace Earnhardt as a voice for the drivers in the NASCAR Nextel Cup garage area.

This week Harvick said longtime Cup star Rusty Wallace filled some of that void until he retired last year.

"With him gone, I can't tell you who is going to step up," Harvick said. "It's like our biggest stars are involved in a lot of other things and not taking 100 percent interest in the sport now."

Without saying his name, Harvick made it clear that he believes four-time champion Jeff Gordon should be filling Earnhardt's role as the unofficial drivers' representative to NASCAR.

"There are people who should be more involved, and you know who I mean," he said.

Gordon shrugged off the apparent criticism, saying the sport has changed and no one can really replace the charismatic and often enigmatic Earnhardt.

"I know people have asked me, 'Why haven't you done that? Why haven't you done that?' I've never really felt like it was my place to do that," Gordon said. "I feel like over the years that I've been here that I've earned more respect, but I don't know if I'll ever have the type of respect that Dale had."

"I think we all play a certain role in doing it together as drivers. It is our responsibility to bring up certain issues and try to do our best to keep the sport growing. But the sport is growing. It's been doing good."

Gordon said Earnhardt was in a unique position, thanks to his success on track, his standing with the other drivers, his friendship with NASCAR bosses Bill France Jr. and Mike Helton and his popularity with fans.

"I don't think that Dale chose to be the leader," Gordon said. "It just kind of happened over time, and his personality and his success on the racetrack kind of led to that."

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