

Will change from 8 to 88 in '08 be good for Junior?

by Bill Center

Now is the time for Dale Earnhardt Jr. to prove he is the driver everyone believes he is.

Not this week, mind you.

Restrictor-plate races have never been a problem for Earnhardt. The 2004 Daytona 500 champion has always been fast on the high-banked, 2 1/2-mile Daytona and Talladega superspeedways.

Overall, however, the past couple of seasons have been so disappointing to Earnhardt that midway through last season he opted to leave the team created by his late father and join NASCAR's reigning powerhouse.

The upside: Earnhardt is assured of getting the best equipment available, the same equipment that has carried Jimmie Johnson to the past two Sprint Cup titles and Jeff Gordon to four championships.

The downside: No longer can Earnhardt claim his team isn't giving him the best car available.

The dilemma: Even given the best equipment, can Earnhardt beat his new teammates?

"It's up to me now," Earnhardt said recently.

Not that Earnhardt has to beat Johnson and Gordon. They are, after all, the best in the sport these days. At the end of the 2007 season, Johnson and Gordon ranked 1-2, respectively, in the final points race for a team that won 18 of the season's 36 races.

Earnhardt? He hasn't won a Sprint Cup race since May 2006. In addition to that 62-race drought, he hasn't been a factor in the points race since finishing third in 2003.

Yet, he is the runaway most popular driver in the sport, which is what made him the most valuable free agent in American sports last year.

Signing Earnhardt was a coup even for an owner of Rick Hendrick's stature.

Even though the driver's trademark Budweiser sponsor and No. 8 ID remained with his former team, DEI, Hendrick had no problems finding new backers for Earnhardt. Three major sponsors share his car and Earnhardt now has his own apparel contract with adidas.

And sales representing Earnhardt's new No. 88 have shot to the top of the charts.

"The biggest thing about Dale is that he fits well into our team," Johnson said recently. "Although they have long been rivals on the track, he and Jeff have been friends for a long time. And I really enjoy having Dale around. He's got a great sense of humor. He's one of those rare people who can make anyone laugh at almost any time."

But while Earnhardt was the big fish on the team that bore his father's name, he is just one of the guys at Hendrick Motorsports.

"I'm the guy without a track record here," Earnhardt said. "But there's no favoritism on the team ... no perks about being the champion, being No. 1 or being the son of the boss."

Which worked both for and against Earnhardt at DEI.

He was the team's standard-bearer. But his stepmother, Teresa Earnhardt, controlled the team. Dale Jr. didn't leave until after a coup attempt failed.

"If I had control of the team, I'd still be there," Earnhardt said last year. "But I didn't have any say in the direction of DEI. So I went out and got the best ride I could get, a great ride."

Johnson and Gordon believe Earnhardt, who at 33 is in the prime of his career, is going to have a banner season.

"You can see the conviction in his eyes," said Johnson. "He wants it. And he's really into it. He has an

understanding of the car. I didn't know that part of him before."

Said Earnhardt: "I left DEI for personal reasons, but the truth is, I do have a better chance at winning a championship with Hendrick. ... This chance to win is why I'm here."

But the true test for Earnhardt will not come this weekend at Daytona.

"This is a long season with a lot of different tracks, including some where I haven't done very well in the past while Hendrick cars were winning," said Earnhardt. "I hope to make it interesting."

No one doubts it will be.

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