Bobby Hamilton was geared for trucks

by Jane Miller

Bobby Hamilton was a no-nonsense racer and a down-to-earth, good guy. Hamilton, diagnosed with cancer in his neck last February, died Sunday at 49.

A winner in all three of NASCAR's major divisions, Hamilton found his greatest success in the Craftsman Truck Series, where he won the championship in 2004.

That series seemed tailor-made for Hamilton, who was able to be a hand-on owner and driver of his race team, because Hamilton was a hands-on guy in the best sense of the word.

He was a man who worked hard for every dollar he earned, a man who treated everyone he met with honesty and respect, a man who battled cancer every bit as fiercely as he battled competitors on the racetrack. Of his four Winston Cup wins, I was in the grandstands for the first - at Phoenix in 1996 where he gave Richard Petty his first victory as a car owner - and his last, at Talladega in the spring of 2001, where drivers tiptoed through the first restrictor-plate race since Dale Earnhardt's death.

But my favorite memory of Hamilton involves a race he didn't win - the 2004 Craftsman Truck race at Gateway International Raceway in Madison, Ill., the one which required four restarts to decide.

Hamilton, who trying to make a pass for the lead, was involved in the wreck with Shane Hmiel on the second restart, a crash that ended with Hamilton driving Hmiel off into the grass.

Hamilton calmly explained his throttle had hung.

How sad for his family to lose a beloved husband, father and grandfather. How sad for us all to lose such a fine driver, team owner and human being.

SOUNDING TESTY

On Monday, Dale Earnhardt Jr. finally commented on some recent remarks his stepmother and car owner, Teresa Earnhardt, made regarding his commitment to his career.

"Right now, the ball's in his court to decide on whether he wants to be a NASCAR driver or whether he wants to be a public personality," Teresa Earnhardt said last month.

At a news conference during Daytona testing, Earnhardt Jr. said he held off on responding to the remarks but that he "just didn't really appreciate it."

Earnhardt Jr.'s contract with Dale Earnhardt, Inc., the company founded by his father, is up at the end of this season. Earnhardt Jr.'s sister, Kelly, is handling his end of the negotiations.

"You know I like driving the red Bud car with the number 8 on it ... basically I don't really know what to tell you other than that. We're working to get through the contract and finish up a new deal."

Earnhardt Jr. also gave a pretty big glimpse into his relationship with his stepmother, with whom he came to live when he was 6 years old.

"Mine and Teresa's relationship has always been very black and white, very strict and in your face," he said. "It's always been the same, the way I felt about her then is the way I feel about her now."

Earnhardt Jr. said the two have not spoken since Teresa Earnhardt made her comments.

"I figured if anything needed to be said, she'd call me up and say it," he said. "But you know, my and her relationship is definitely a factor into my decision to drive there."

FAST TESTING

It's definitely not surprising to see Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s name at the top of the time sheet after the first drafting practice Tuesday afternoon at Daytona International Speedway.

He ran a fast lap of 186.606 mph. Casey Mears and Tony Raines were second and third.

Raines was the fastest on Monday morning in a non-drafting session with a 183.974 fast lap. Jamie McMurray led the Tuesday morning session in 184.090.

Teams in the first round of testing had an additional two sessions Wednesday plus an extra session Thursday morning because Monday afternoon's session was rained out.

IROC DELAY

The International Race of Champions four-race season is being delayed because the series is without a title sponsor. That means that the traditional season-opener at Daytona will not take place this year.

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