

Auto Racing: Old school was way cool

by Jane_Miller

I had a rare Friday night off last week and was watching SPEED while waiting to see if qualifying at Texas was going to take place. During the evening, episodes of Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s program, "Back in the Day" were airing. It was the first time I had watched the show and I was only half paying attention but caught enough to notice that it was pretty entertaining.

Near the end of one episode, a couple of drivers, including Richard Petty, served as relief drivers for other competitors during a particularly grueling race and Junior popped up on the screen and remarked something about there being a need for a lot of relief drivers in those days.

Fast forward to Sunday, when Junior was to relive one of those moments. Kyle Busch had left Texas Motor Speedway after being involved in a wreck - ironically with Junior - and Busch's crew had the car repaired but no driver. Junior was still at the track and a crew member who also is a friend of Earnhardt's asked him to drive.

He said he would and finished the final few laps in the Hendrick Motorsports No. 5.

"I'll always jump at a chance to climb into someone else's car to see what it's like," he said. "They used to do that all the time back in the day. You'd have relief drivers getting into someone's car almost every week, so it was kinda like a step back into NASCAR history or something. Old school! It was cool."

Also cool for Earnhardt Jr. this season is the success he's having in the Car of Tomorrow. Sunday's race at Phoenix International Raceway is a COT event.

"I was really encouraged by how well we've done in the first two races with the Car of Tomorrow," Earnhardt Jr. said. "I think everyone in the garage area is anxious to see how this new car reacts on a track that's longer than the two short tracks we've raced on so far. We've been able to find some things in the set-up that the COT seems to respond to, so I'm anxious to climb in and get there."

Earnhardt Jr. has been encouraged by his team's performances this year, though the results might not always show it.

"We've had a lot of bad luck and haven't had the finishes this entire team deserves," he said. "We know if we keep doing what we've been doing, we'll be celebrating sooner rather than later."

STEPPING BACK

Four-time NHRA champion Gary Scelzi announced Tuesday he is leaving Don Schumacher's team at the end of this season.

Scelzi made clear that he didn't consider this a retirement, but his family business, his wife and growing children need his attention. "I just can't do 23 races, get back involved in the business and do either of them any good," said Scelzi, winner of three Top Fuel and one Funny Car title. "Do I want to leave? Not really. And that's why I'm saying that I'm not quitting drag racing because it may be a year, it may be two, it may be never, I can't say for sure. If Don has a car for Pomona (the season's first race) and needs a driver for a couple of races, hopefully I'd be his guy."

Schumacher said he has already begun searching for a replacement for the popular driver and will look in the NHRA nitro and alcohol ranks as well as Pro Stock and the IHRA.

"Gary, besides being a good driver, is a great personality and we need to find somebody that can try to measure up to that," Schumacher said. "They certainly won't be able to equal what Gary is, but we need to bring a character into the sport."