

## When Dale Earnhardt Jr. switches teams, we may finally find out how good he really is

by Bill Center

The overall grade on Dale Earnhardt Jr. as a driver is still incomplete.

We know he can win races.

But championships?

Everyone believes Junior is a better driver than the cars supplied by his late father's team. But no one knows for sure.

Soon we will find out. His grade will soar to an A if he wins a Nextel Cup title. Even if he never does, he deserves a high B.

But in terms of being a negotiator, Junior's grades are not very good to this point. Last week, for the second time in less than six months, Dale Earnhardt Jr. backed himself into a corner.

He essentially promised whatever team signs him a championship - raising both the pressure on himself and the team that ultimately signs him.

Earlier, Earnhardt said he wanted "at least 51 percent control" of Dale Earnhardt Inc. from his stepmother.

Public ultimatums are not usually strategically strong openers to negotiations. When Teresa Earnhardt didn't blink, Dale Jr. was left with no choice but to seek greener pastures.

Chances are DEI will be the big loser in the split. Without Dale Jr., Teresa has little to market.

But will Earnhardt Jr. be the winner that everyone expects him to become?

Observers are divided.

Not since first Cale Yarborough and then Darrell Waltrip left Junior Johnson in the 1980s has there been a driver/team split of this magnitude. But both Yarborough and Waltrip departed as champions.

Three times in the past four seasons, Earnhardt has finished among the top five in the final standings. But in 2005, he didn't come close to making the Chase for the Championship cut-off. He is on the bubble again this year.

And he has twice as many did-not-finishes in his career than wins.

All car?

It was Teresa who raised the thorny issue of her stepson concentrating more on driving and less on his outside interests if he truly wanted to be a champion. While most observers thought her assertion to be over-the-top, they admit her claim has merit.

So, where does Dale Earnhardt Jr. go from here?

Some thoughts:

Richard Childress Racing: Dale Jr.'s legion of fans seem to be pulling for him to join the team that fielded six of the seven cars that Dale Earnhardt drove to titles. Childress also owns the rights to Earnhardt's famed No. 3. Dale Jr. in the No. 3? Even the son admits that pressure might be too much to bear. But Childress is the type of nurturing owner who could get the most out of Dale Jr. And after four lean seasons, the team returned to power last year.

Hendrick Motorsports: The most powerful team in NASCAR right now, particularly in the era of the Car of Tomorrow. But Hendrick already has two championship drivers in Jeff Gordon and Jimmie Johnson and is maxed out at the NASCAR limit of four cars. Would Hendrick jettison present champion Johnson's friend Casey Mears to add Dale Jr.? Someone would have to go to make room.

Joe Gibbs Racing: Dale Jr. would give the team the perfect personality balance to two-time champion Tony

Stewart. Like Childress, Gibbs could add a fourth car, although J.J. Yeley could be on the ropes. But there are problems. Gibbs has committed his team to running without an alcohol distiller as a sponsor. And Earnhardt has a personal services contract with Budweiser, which is evaluating its present contract with DEI and without Dale Jr.

Ginn Racing: First-year Chevy team owner Bobby Ginn scored a major coup this year by luring Mark Martin away from Jack Roush and Ford. The new association has also pumped life back into Martin's career. The team has deep pockets and Ginn has an advanced engineering staff. Still, it would be a major gamble for Dale Jr.

Penske South: On paper, it makes no sense. Penske runs Dodges and Earnhardt has lifelong ties to Chevrolet that were cemented with his father. But will the "new" Dodge remain in NASCAR? Penske has ties with Chevrolet dating back to when he won the Indy 500 with Chevy engines. If Penske wanted to return to Chevy, what better way than with Dale Earnhardt Jr.

Chip Ganassi: Extremely shrewd owner who knows about marketing. Brought former IndyCar and Formula One winner Juan Pablo Montoya into the sport this season. Again, there's that Dodge thing.

Roush-Fenway Racing: It has been mentioned, but this is a long shot. Earnhardt doesn't fit the style of driver Roush has signed in the past. and Ford? Not only is it the anti-Chevy, but Fords have lost ground the past couple of seasons.

Clearly, Earnhardt wants to go to the team that gives him the best shot at the title. "You give me the car, I'll win the championship," were his exact words.

Money? It will follow whatever path NASCAR's most-popular driver chooses to follow.

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