

Motorsports

Earnhardt hoping to drive 'Amelia' back to victory lane



Dale Earnhardt Jr prepares to climb into his car during practice for the NASCAR Daytona 500 on Friday.

By JENNA FRYER
AP Auto Racing Writer

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Her name is Amelia, and boy, can she fly.

She'll be forever treasured by Dale Earnhardt Jr., even though he wants nothing more than to give her away Sunday.

Amelia Earhart is the nickname of the sleek and superfast Chevrolet that Earnhardt drove to three wins last season. The car never finished lower than third in five races, and Earnhardt couldn't find a reason to keep her out of the upcoming Daytona 500.

The decision was easy. Instead of building a new car specifically for the "The Great American Race" — what most teams do every off-season — Earnhardt opted to give Amelia another shot at getting to victory lane. She delivered Thursday night when Earnhardt won a 150-mile qualifying race to up her record to four wins in six starts over the last 13 months.

"The car really does everything I ask it to do," Earnhardt said after

Daytona 500

-Daytona International Speedway (Daytona Beach)
-Sunday, 10 a.m.
-TV: FOX

his win. "When you have a car that you know can do the things that this car can do, you're willing to take those gambles and risks to pull out and pass. It's just a fun car to drive. Really special car."

When Rick Hendrick leaned into the window after Earnhardt's latest victory, the driver urged his team owner to keep track of Amelia and consider putting her on display in his museum.

For now, he's just fine if he says goodbye to her Sunday. Daytona International Speedway displays the winning car for a year, and teams gladly exchange them for the trophy. Earnhardt, a two-time 500 winner, decided chassis No. 88-872 needed a name when crew chief Greg Ives declined to retire the car.

"The fact that we're going to keep running it, I said, 'We gotta

name it,' and we were thinking of a woman who has accomplished something that was an awesome person that was something we could be proud of," Earnhardt said. "Amelia Earhart was the first thing that came to my mind. She must have been the most daring. She sort of fits that mold of the courage and determination that you need as a race car driver. She must have had that and more to be able to do the things she did in her lifetime."

So it's the car that gives Earnhardt the confidence to make the moves he did Thursday night while winning for the 17th time at Daytona. The victory came on the 15th anniversary of his father's death. Although he daydreamed about winning to honor his father, he really just didn't want to embarrass himself with a poor showing.

There was no chance of that happening as he dominated by leading 43 of the 60 laps Saturday and passing Denny Hamlin, winner of last week's exhibition race, with ease to claim the victory.

From tractor to track: Robert Richardson the surprise of Daytona 500

By DAN GELSTON
AP Sports Writer

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Robert Richardson Jr. is ready to make hay at the Daytona 500.

The Texas driver only got the call two weeks ago from BK Racing to attempt the "The Great American Race." With a newborn son at home, Richardson took a break from his full-time job at a ranch and will try and mow down a different kind of field.

Richardson raced his way into the Daytona 500, one more driver with a chance to win for NASCAR's most eclectic team.

BK Racing has more cars in NASCAR's marquee race than Roger Penske and Chip Ganassi, and the same number as Rick Hendrick and Joe Gibbs.

Richardson, David Ragan, Matt DiBenedetto and two-time Daytona 500 champion Michael Waltrip have helped BK Racing somehow beat the odds and fill a 10th of

the Daytona 500 field.

"This is my only opportunity to race this year," Richardson said. "This is my opportunity to get my racing fix in for the season."

Richardson should be used to waiting for a turn that might never come: the burly, 33 year old spent the 2001 season at SMU as a backup quarterback.

Can he throw one more Hail Mary and pull off Daytona's wildest upset?

Starting 40th, probably not.

But for Richardson, who had more than 100 congratulatory text messages, just earning a ride in the No. 26 Toyota was a victory.

Only two spots were up for grabs in the 500 — one in each qualifying race. Michael McDowell earned the spot in the first race, while Richardson secured the final transfer spot on Thursday.

Not bad for Richardson, who has only eight career Sprint Cup starts and none since 2009.



Robert Richardson Jr, left, signs autographs for fans after practice for Sunday's NASCAR Daytona 500 in Daytona Beach, Fla., on Friday.

"Man, that's better than winning the lottery right there," said Richardson, who added that every dollar he earns this weekend will go into a college fund for his newborn son. Richardson manages hay production as his full-time job at a ranch in Pilot Point, Texas.

BK Racing held a pair of winning tickets when it was granted two of the 36 charters

available from NASCAR that guaranteed spots in the field each race.

DiBenedetto had one of the spots. But BK Racing was able to snag Daytona vet Waltrip for one race, forcing DiBenedetto to qualify as an open car. In exchange, DiBenedetto got to run with a Toyota engine instead of a Triad engine. DiBenedetto will return to the No. 83

Toyota next weekend at Atlanta.

BK Racing made its Sprint Cup debut in 2012 out of the ashes of Red Bull Racing. Ragan, with two career Cup victories, joined the team once Michael Waltrip Racing folded. DiBenedetto made 33 starts and posted an average finish of 32nd in his rookie 2015 season for BK Racing.

"Whether this is my last race or not," Richardson said, "this is a good way to go out."

Waltrip sold his fleet of cars and chassis shops to BK Racing.

"We're not afraid to run 'em and race 'em and wreck 'em," BK Racing President Ron Devine said Friday.

He's also not afraid to go against the grain and pluck a farmer out of obscurity for a Daytona ride.

Richardson drove the No. 23 back in previous stints in Cup and Xfinity. He also had a sponsor in Stalk It, which makes goods out of cornstalk.

Stalk It wanted back in racing and reached out to BK

about putting Richardson in the 23. Ragan drives the No. 23 this year, but a deal was struck to bring Richardson into the fold for one race.

"I was skeptical about it," said Devine, who once owned as many as 26 Burger King franchises before he sold them last May. "We were a pretty good three-car team. To have four cars was a bit much."

Four proved the magic number at Daytona.

"I sat on my balcony on the beach at 2:30 in the morning trying to keep up with texts," Devine said. "I was just in disbelief that it was going on."

Devine said he'd like his cars to run inside the top 30 this season and become more competitive in the years ahead. BK Racing could run three cars in six to eight races this season.

So, who knows? Richardson might have another shot at a feel-good ride this season. But if this is the final straw of his racing career, he's at peace.

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