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## Five years later, still looking for the new face of NASCAR

By Nate Ryan, USA TODAY

In the hours before that fateful Daytona 500 five years ago, the face of NASCAR's premier circuit was Dale Earnhardt.



Since Dale Earnhardt's death in 2001, NASCAR's popularity has grown, but without an iconic driver of his stature.

By Steve Helber, AP

Wherever Earnhardt wandered in the pits, competitors gravitated to the charismatic legend with the mustache and wraparound sunglasses. They soaked in every ounce of wisdom from the driver Bill France Jr. said was NASCAR's greatest ever.

When Earnhardt strode across the stage in prerace introductions Feb. 18, 2001, his imposing 6-1 frame drew the largest cheer.

It might have marked the end of the one-man show in stock car racing.

"I don't see any one person that everyone migrates to in this sport anymore," says Jeff Burton, who drives for Richard Childress Racing, Earnhardt's former team. "When you have an opportunity to pick the mind of a seven-time champion, that's a special thing."

And yet, five years after losing its biggest name on the final lap of its most famous race, NASCAR is enjoying record TV ratings, unprecedented infusions of cash from big-ticket sponsors such as Toyota and a marketable lineup of star drivers from Generations X and Y.

The sport has swapped title sponsors, replaced Chairman Bill France Jr. with his son, Brian, and radically altered its championship format since Earnhardt's death.

What the Nextel Cup Series lacks is an icon as powerful and transcendent as Earnhardt, who was compared by NASCAR's movers and shakers to Elvis Presley, James Dean, John Wayne, Babe Ruth and Michael Jordan.

"I've seen no one become the spokesperson for the driver brigade



Fans pay tribute to Earnhardt at the statue bearing his likeness outside the Daytona speedway where he died.

By Sean Dougherty, USA TODAY

emblazoned merchandise in the millions of units.

•Jeff Gordon, 34, has capitalized on his movie-star looks and silky smooth image to form alliances with Madison Avenue (as a high-end corporate pitchman) and Hollywood (as a TV show host) that even the financially savvy Earnhardt might not have thought possible.

•Reigning champion Tony Stewart, 34, has honed an edgy desire to win into the closest approximation of Earnhardt's at-track persona, unafraid to challenge NASCAR as a sharp-tongued but respected critic.

Earnhardt Jr., Gordon and Stewart are in heavy rotation in the NASCAR marketing machine, which also has hummed along by promoting photogenic up-and-comers such as Jimmie Johnson, 30, and Kasey Kahne, 25.

"I don't think any one person has stepped up to fill that vacuum left by Earnhardt, nor do I think NASCAR necessarily wants someone to," says David Carter, principal of The Sports Business Group, a Los Angeles-based sports consulting firm. "Having numerous drivers step up to the plate helps NASCAR continue to build its fan base."

### **Earnhardt appeal cut across sport**

Carter believes NASCAR's first network TV deal, in 2001, and the spread of racetracks to major markets in Chicago, Los Angeles, Kansas City, Dallas-Fort Worth and Miami, have dispersed stardom across the series by widening its audience. The expanding multimedia landscape diluted the opportunity for a personality as dominant as Earnhardt, whose North Carolina roots appealed to the Southern core of NASCAR's traditionalist fan base.

"So many other drivers can get out there and communicate their personalities through the Speed Channel, ESPN and corporate hospitality," Carter says. "There's a lot more outlets for people to get to know and form opinions about drivers."

According to Joe Mattes, vice president of e-commerce at Turner Sports, Earnhardt Jr., Gordon and Stewart rank as the top three in sales at NASCAR.com. Earnhardt remains a top-10 seller, but Mattes said the revenue is spread more evenly than 10 years ago, when there was a dropoff in demand beyond the late superstar's products.

It was Earnhardt who pioneered the concept of cashing in on his name and licensing his "Intimidator" image into a million-dollar moneymaker. That business acumen, plus a record-tying seven championships that no longer seem possible in this era of parity, catapulted him from regional folk hero to a pop culture status replete with movie cameos and invitations to the National Press Club.

### **Still among top sellers**

Five years after his death, Dale Earnhardt remains one of the top sellers in NASCAR merchandise. The drivers whose merchandise sold the most at NASCAR.com Superstore:

1. Dale Earnhardt Jr.
2. Jeff Gordon

as Dale Earnhardt was week in and week out," says Larry McReynolds, a former Earnhardt crew chief and now a TV analyst on Speed Channel and Fox. "I don't know that we ever will have anybody that will fill those shoes."

There seems a consensus that a triumvirate of drivers share the burden Earnhardt once shouldered largely by himself.

•Dale Earnhardt Jr., 31, has inherited the bulk of his father's popularity (XM Satellite Radio has given him a weekly radio show) as well as his magic for moving team-

3. Tony Stewart
4. Jimmie Johnson
5. Kasey Kahne
6. Dale Earnhardt
7. Rusty Wallace
8. Mark Martin
9. Elliott Sadler
10. Ryan Newman

Michael Jordan in the NBA, Elvis in rock music and Dale Earnhardt here. Right now, we don't have that person.

"Junior does a great job of carrying the sport as far as fan popularity and in the race car, but he's not that person his dad was as far as NASCAR and seeing what was best for the sport."

Through wealth, fame and success, Earnhardt gained enormous cachet with NASCAR's power brokers.

President Mike Helton was a frequent recipient of his 6 a.m. wake-up calls. Earnhardt took fishing trips to the Bahamas with France and hesitated to march into the sanctioning body's trailer to demand changes in rules and criticize policy.

"He had NASCAR's ear from the top down, and the other competitors knew that," NASCAR spokesman Jim Hunter says.

"They'd go to Earnhardt and say, 'Why don't you talk to them about this?' Because everyone knew NASCAR would listen to him."

Says McReynolds: "The big joke was, if it was raining, and you saw Earnhardt in street clothes or headed toward his motorcoach, your race was called. I'm not saying they made all their decisions based on what he would tell them, but when he spoke, they listened."

Other drivers, particularly rookies, hung on Earnhardt's every word. Elliott Sadler entered the circuit in 1999 and was among the last classes to be schooled by Earnhardt.

Sadler says NASCAR has been invaded by a 21st century wave of young drivers who arrive "with a lot of attitude of 'I'm the new sav sport' because they haven't had that talk we all had."

"Dale would sit us down, tell us how you're supposed to race, how you treat your sponsors and how you do things," Sadler says. "We're not that stature figure anymore for young kids to look up to."



"It'd be neat to have another driver like Dale Earnhardt step up and take over all the drivers in the garage, but now we don't have that."

**Media-conscious is the new normal**

Gordon and Stewart see themselves as successors to inheriting a larger-than-life garage built by Earnhardt.

USA TODAY photo

Earnhardt earned respect from fellow drivers and exerted influence with NASCAR executives that no other drivers achieved.

Earnhardt's clout increased over the years; no active driver has approached the recent numbers of Gordon and Stewart.

Gordon and Stewart. Gordon has four championships and 73 victories — three from tying Earnhardt for sixth on the career list.

Stewart has captured two titles in the past four seasons.

Both have been outspoken on hot-button issues: After Sunday's Budweiser Shootout, Stewart made an impassioned plea for NASCAR to curb aggressive driving at Daytona or else "we're going to kill someone."

Gordon hasn't been shy about hammering NASCAR on safety upgrades and sponsorship conflicts.

Like Earnhardt, who was nicknamed "Ironhead" for his stubbornness and willingness to wreck even a friend if it meant winning, Stewart and Gordon seem impervious to booing.

"Earnhardt was the type of person who could be hated and loved," says Jimmy Spencer, who drove the cup circuit from 1989 to 2005 and now is an analyst for Speed. "All the drivers today are trying to be loved and want to say the right things for the media and sponsors."

If Gordon isn't overly conscientious about being universally adored, he also isn't consumed with becoming the focal point every Sunday morning.

"The more years I'm in this sport, the more respect I earn," he says. "I'm not asking for guys to come and bounce things off me. If they want to, I'm certainly going to give my opinion. I'm not going to hold back."

He learned that from listening to Earnhardt. "I miss the heck out of him," Gordon says.

"He was a great inspiration and somebody I always felt like I could go to, and I don't know if I have that go-to guy now. I don't think his presence will be replaced."

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