

# George Diaz: Dale Earnhardt Jr. Enjoys The Ride With Father's Memories

BY GEORGE DIAZ

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DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. (MCT) — At 7:49 a.m. Monday, still in a fuzzy daze after a couple of hours' sleep, Dale Earnhardt Jr. took a minute to pose in front of a statue outside Daytona International Speedway. Click went the cellphone.

Dale smiled, capturing an image that will be cherished forevermore: Father and son, celebrating a Daytona 500 victory.

"Look who I ran into at the Daytona Experience. Dad's Happy!" Earnhardt tweeted.

The old man would have scoffed at this new-fangled Twitter thing. Junior kinda felt the same way, even though he had a growing account with 231,459 followers. That's a lot of followers for a man with zero tweets as of late Sunday night. He didn't even know his password.

Then Junior sent out his first tweet in the wee hours of Monday, shortly after he won the 2014 Daytona 500.

"Tonight seemed like as good a night as any to join Twitter. How is everyone doin'?" he asked, posting a picture of himself with the trophy.

His account has been blowing up ever since: 416K-plus, and rising by the thousands every hour.

The seismic impact of Dale Earnhardt Jr. winning the Daytona 500 will be hard to understand for the casual sports fan.

Earnhardt is no Michael, Messi or Manning by any stretch. But within NASCAR's universe, there is no other. He has been voted the sport's most popular athlete 11 consecutive years.



## Victory A Long Time In The Making

**ABOVE:** Dale Earnhardt Jr. (88) beats Denny Hamlin (11) to the finish line to win the Daytona 500 at Daytona International Speedway in Daytona Beach, Fla., on Sunday. (Stephen M. Dowell/Orlando Sentinel/MCT)

**RIGHT:** Dale Earnhardt Jr. celebrates in Victory Lane after winning the Daytona 500 at Daytona International Speedway in Daytona Beach, Fla., on Sunday. (Stephen M. Dowell/Orlando Sentinel/MCT)

secutive years.

That is why as the final laps clicked down, photographers wearing headphones along the base of the track could still hear fans screaming every time Junior crossed the start/finish line.

The heavens already had parted once in Daytona, and then it happened again hours later. 'Round midnight, as the cars sped down Daytona International Speedway on the final lap, the NASCAR Nation shed tears, witnessing history.

Junior was rambling toward the checkered flag, free from all the heartbreak that has burdened one of the first families of NASCAR.

He contemplated putting three fingers in the air to honor his daddy — who died in this place 13 years ago and is memorialized by the statue — and then pulled back, trying not to send mixed signals to all those fans who endured the rain and the wind and the mud to cheer for the only driver who mattered.

It was his day, his night.

"You realize at that moment there's countless people watching on television, there's countless sitting in the grandstands with your shirts and hats on, your team over on pit wall, your crew chief, your family back home watching," Earnhardt said. "There's so many people

pulling for you that want to see you win, it's a heavy weight."

Yes it is. Junior considered ditching the sport shortly after his father died on the last lap of the Daytona 500. Who would want to sign up for all that baggage? It was a good thing, but still he could never be his own man.

He seems comfortable now with the daunting expectations. He is the face of NASCAR. That will never change until the day he retires.

No worries, he's got some time. He will turn 40 in October and has gotten a bit more introspective. Call it an older man's wisdom.



But there's something else to Junior. It's a simple thing called happiness. He is in a good place, surrounded by people who care about him, from his girlfriend Amy Reimann to crew chief Steve Letarte to owner Rick Hendrick.

He picked up Hendrick for a victory spin Sunday night, and the old guy thought he might be taking a dive around the tri-oval any minute.

The good times continued as Junior entered the Media Center screaming, "Who-hooo!"

Why not? It had been a while since Junior checked into Victory Lane, 55 races to be exact. He won for the sec-

ond time in almost six years. All the while, Junior Nation kept waiting, wondering and, at times, whining.

"A lot of pressure," Hendrick said. "It was an awful lot of pressure. I felt like I let him down. He felt like he let me down. But we locked arms and said, 'We're going to figure it out.'"

Now they coast. A victory essentially assures them a spot in the newfangled post-season Chase and, just perhaps, more poignant photos to share. The goal of winning Junior's first Cup title now is officially within reach.

We suspect dad is happy with the developments.

## No. 16 Huskers Topple No. 8 Lady Lions 94-74

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Tear'a Laudermill and her Nebraska teammates had good reason to be motivated for eighth-ranked Penn State's visit to Pinnacle Bank Arena.

The Lady Lions had beaten them three straight times by an average of 19 points, and the Big Ten championship is still up for grabs.

Also, Laudermill had a surprise waiting for her when she got to the arena Monday night. The junior guard's brother, Theron, was in town from California to watch her play for the first time as a collegian.

"Oh, my goodness, it's on and cracking now," Laudermill said of her thoughts as she ran onto the floor before tipoff.

Laudermill scored 22 of her career-high 27 points and made six of her school record-tying seven 3-pointers in the first half, and No. 16 Nebraska defeated the Lady Lions 94-74.

Yes, things were rolling for the Cornhuskers (21-5, 11-3), who extended their winning streak to a season-best eight games and pulled within a half-game of the two-time defending champion Lady Lions (21-6, 12-3). The Huskers have two games remaining in the regular season and the Lady Lions have one.

The surprisingly easy win came after a 3-point shooting performance that was best in Division I this season, according to STATS. The Huskers finished 16 of 22 from beyond the arc, a 72.7-percent clip. The school record for 3s is 17.

The Huskers made 11 of 14 3-pointers in the first half. The 78.6-percent accuracy was best by a major-conference team in a half this season and No. 2 in Division I behind Alabama State's 81.8 percent (9 of 11) against Arkansas-Pine Bluff.

"I made a brazen comment before the game that we needed to make some perimeter shots," a smiling Nebraska coach Connie Yori said. "Our

## Girls

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Central 65-45 in the first round Monday night of the District 12B Tournament in Marty.

Apollonia Zephier added 19 points and nine steals for the Lady Braves (13-8), while Rose Drapeaux had 12 points, 12 rebounds and eight steals.

For Andes Central (3-18), Auviah Laweka scored 17 points and grabbed 10 rebounds, while Tearanie Stotz had 11 points. Beulah Black Cloud also hauled in 10 rebounds.

Marty Indian advances to play Burke-South Central tonight (Tuesday) in Burke.

ANDES CENTRAL (3-18).....16 25 34 45  
MARTY INDIAN (13-8).....17 30 44 65

### Gregory 44, Colome 39

COLOME — Behind 15 points from Briana Leber, the Gregory Gorillas upset Colome 44-39 in the first round of the District 12B Tournament on Monday night in Colome.

Megan Preslicka added 12 points, while Courtney Opbrock had 12 points and nine rebounds for Gregory (3-18).

In the loss for Colome, which ends its season 6-15, Taylor Juracek scored 13 points and Rebecca Moorhead grabbed 11 rebounds.

Gregory advances to play top-seeded Avon tonight (Tuesday) at 7 p.m. in Avon.

COLOME (6-15).....9 14 26 39  
GREGORY (3-18).....11 19 33 44

### District 4B

### Sunshine Bible 56, Lower Brule 33

MILLER — Tricia Wilken scored a game-high 21 points to lead Sunshine Bible past Lower Brule 56-33 in the opening round of the District 4B Girls' Basketball Tournament on Monday.

Susan Wilken scored 12 points on four shots, going 3-3 from three-point range and

3-4 from the line, for Sunshine Bible. Cassie Beckwith added eight points and 12 rebounds.

For Lower Brule, Ryan Gray led the way with 14 points. Kiersten Wilson and Paige Grooms each had nine rebounds.

Sunshine Bible advances to face top-ranked Sully Buttes today (Tuesday) in Onida.

LOWER BRULE.....8 12 25 33  
SUNSHINE BIBLE.....12 28 40 56

### District 6B

### Wolsey-Wessington 50, Iroquois 20

WOLSEY — Bailey Zerfoss scored a game-high 17 points to lead Wolsey-Wessington to a 50-20 victory over Iroquois in the opening round of the District 6B Girls' Basketball Tournament on Monday.

Megan Eggleston netted 12 points and Brittany Bergquist had 11 rebounds in the victory.

Kelsey Blue led Iroquois (1-17) with six points and seven rebounds.

Wolsey-Wessington, 4-17, advances to face top-seeded Sanborn Central today (Tuesday) at 4 p.m.

IROQUOIS (1-17).....6 10 13 20  
WOLSEY-WESSINGTON (4-17).....7 14 28 50

### Other Games

### Mitchell 61, Brookings 32

MITCHELL — Macy Miller scored 29 points on 10-of-14 shooting to lead Mitchell past Brookings 61-32 in Monday night's regular season finale for both teams.

Miller was 9-of-9 at the free throw line, while Taylor Volesky added 17 points for the Kernels (19-1).

In the loss for the Bobcats (12-8), Sara Tvedt scored eight points and grabbed 12 rebounds, while Kaitlyn Hadley added six points.

BROOKINGS (12-8).....4 13 22 32  
MITCHELL (19-1).....24 36 47 61

## Boys

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help lead O'Neill past Madison 59-57 in the Sub-District C1-8 opener on Monday night in Norfolk.

Charley Burtwistle added 13 points for O'Neill (16-9), which will play top-seeded Boone Central-Newman Grove tonight (Tuesday) in Norfolk.

For Madison (9-15), Eric Pfeifer scored 15 points and Zach Wells added 12 points.

MADISON (9-15).....16 30 44 57  
O'NEILL (16-9).....17 24 43 59

### Other Games

### Elk Point-Jefferson 65, West Central 64

ELK POINT — Andrew Flynn scored a game-high 25 points and the Elk Point-Jefferson Huskies needed every last one in a 65-64 boys' win Monday night over West Central.

Michael Murphy hit a three-pointer with five seconds left to win the game, in what was the regular season finale for both teams.

Brandon Koupal added 15 points, while Adam Shanks had nine points for the Huskies (8-12). Jordan Brandon chipped in with seven points.

For the Trojans (4-16), Cody Bussell scored 21 points, Noah Matson had 13 points and Brayden Swartwout grabbed nine rebounds.

WEST CENTRAL (4-16).....17 35 49 64  
ELK POINT-JEFFERSON (8-12).....20 33 46 65

### Beresford 73, Marion 41

BERESFORD — Logan Busch scored 18 points and Oliver Doeden added 17 points to guide the Beresford Watchdogs past Marion 73-41 in boys' action Monday night. Doeden also grabbed 14 points, while Kory Diefendorf posted 11 points, seven assists and six rebounds.

Beresford (11-8), hosts Tea Area on Friday night.

For Marion (3-15), Nick Gortmaker had 21 points and Jacob Wuertz hauled in 12 rebounds. The Bears visit Gayville-Volin on Thursday.

MARION (3-15).....11 18 26 41  
BERESFORD (11-8).....17 41 61 73

### MCM 70, MVP 47

MOUNT VERNON — McCook Central-Montrose scored 31 points in the fourth quarter and routed Mount Vernon-

Plankinton 70-47 on Monday night in Mount Vernon.

Will Gottlob had 14 points and eight rebounds for the Fighting Cougars (10-9), while Tim Gassman scored 13 points and Cole Cheeseman added 10 points.

For MVP (9-11) in its regular season finale, Deric Denning scored 26 points and Cody Renken had seven points.

MCM closes its regular season at home Friday night against Baltic in Montrose.

MCCOOK CENTRAL-MONT. (10-9).....31 45 57 70  
MOUNT VERNON-PLANKINTON (9-11)16 26 43 47

### Tri-Valley 63, Baltic 33

COLTON — Brendon Boomsma scored 19 points and Will Steineke added 15 as Tri-Valley rolled past Baltic 63-33 in boys' action Monday in Colton.

Joseph Newman posted seven rebounds and four assists for the Mustangs (9-10), who led 32-14 at halftime.

In the loss for the Bulldogs (5-14), David Boer scored 10 points and grabbed six rebounds.

Both teams close the regular season Friday night, with Tri-Valley visiting Sioux Falls Christian and Baltic facing McCook Central-Montrose in Montrose.

BALTIC (5-14).....5 14 20 33  
TRI-VALLEY (9-10).....18 32 50 63

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