

# Larger than life

by Michele Rousseau

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He lived for Daytona, he died for Daytona. What more can be said. Dale Earnhardt was a fierce competitor to the end. And he wouldn't have wanted to go any other way. You almost have to wonder if, on some level, he knew it was his time. He almost seemed ready.

In reflecting on the pre-race coverage, it seemed like a less-than-credible movie script with a little too much foreshadowing. The candid moments in the garage during Saturday's Happy Hour, with Dale Jarrett grinning ear to ear as he conversed with Earnhardt, seemed a bit unusual. Drivers usually seem a little more somber around him. The pre-race hug and kiss from Earnhardt's wife, Theresa, seemed to last just a moment longer than you would expect, almost as if she knew it would be the last time and didn't want to let go. And, as Earnhardt protected Jr. and Waltrip down to the last lap, you couldn't help but think, "That's not like him - he runs to win."

So, perhaps, he knew something we didn't. Perhaps we should've known. It wasn't long after the wreck that things became pretty obvious. We chose not to see it or, more likely, not to believe it. When you've watched enough racing, you know how it goes down. The information provided on Tony Stewart after the 18-car crash was prompt and specific. The lack of information following Earnhardt's crash was significant in and of itself. But then there was Schrader. The lack of meaningful response, combined with the pallor and concern displayed on his face, reminded me of someone who had just seen a ghost. Chances are, he knew he had.

Yet, when the news finally came, it took the wind out of you, like you'd been punched in the chest. "He can't have died, not Earnhardt." Much like Jeremy Mayfield, we all thought Earnhardt would pick himself up, dust himself off, and appear before us grinning his impish grin. Not this time - our memories will have to do the job.

My phone rang constantly for hours after that. Only in talking about it could race fans everywhere absorb the news. It was a sad day in the history of racing, a bittersweet moment in time on many levels. This was not a young and promising career destroyed before it began, but a legend already made stepping up to the next level. Yet, it was something you hate to see happen. Not only for the Earnhardt family, but for Michael Waltrip, the other "big loser" in this year's Daytona.

Sensitive and emotional, the Waltrips seem so genuine, it's hard not to like them and want good things to happen for them. One finally does only to be ripped to

shreds before it's whole. What should have been the happiest moment in this driver's life was overshadowed by the race's tragic end. The man who should have been the biggest winner lost more than he gained -- a friend, a car owner, and the glory they deserved to share. Waltrip deserved his moment in the sun and yet he got little more than a moment's notice. My heart ached watching Michael in the Winner's Circle, looking around for those who helped him make it a reality, knowing that soon the news would come and his joy would turn to desolation.

Yet I also knew there was more to it. Waltrip had Earnhardt's help alright...in a way that was larger than life. How else could you explain the timing? If Earnhardt died instantly on impact and Waltrip crossed the finish line only a moment later, I have to believe it was a team effort - they won it together. Much like the spirit of Dreyfuss' character in the movie "Always," Earnhardt guided Waltrip through the final moments, knowing he deserved it. He believed in Waltrip when few others did and gave him his chance to shine. He knew how it felt to be in the winner's circle at Daytona, and he wanted to share that feeling. The joy of the win needs to be celebrated regardless of the tragedy. That's how Earnhardt would have wanted it.

But the question remains --"Why?" Earnhardt had done it all in racing. He'd won, he'd lost, he'd rubbed, he'd raced. Maybe he knew there was something more to be done. Perhaps he had a point to make. It hasn't been that long since the losses of Kenny Irwin and Adam Petty, younger and less-experienced drivers who perhaps made an error you would never expect from someone who had been around the block a time or two.

Earnhardt made it clear in the way he left that no amount of experience is enough to avoid the inevitable. When it is your time, there is no avoiding it. We are all human. Death can (and will) defeat us all. But Earnhardt remains larger than life. His spirit will live on forever, in our hearts and in our minds, as a NASCAR legend like no other.