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The Death of Dale Earnhardt

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It was Tuesday of last week when a colleague stopped me to say that he was distressed that he couldn't find any Earnhardt coverage in the media here in Orlando. Preoccupied with other matters I was a bit slow on the uptake, but then realized that he was joking.

The media coverage here and across the country resembled a blizzard of the North Dakota variety.

For those not attuned to NASCAR the volume of the outpouring of grief over Dale Earnhardt's death was a bit surprising. Of course, it should not have been. NASCAR is now a multi-million dollar industry with its own subsidiary industries. Dale Earnhardt Inc. is one of those. NASCAR has gone from a regional sport to a national sport with tracks in many major cities across America.

Dale Earnhardt's devoted following was stunned by the news last Sunday evening. The crash into the wall at turn four at Daytona didn't look all that bad, especially in comparison to the crash less than twenty laps before when eighteen cars went flying in all directions, and only one driver had anything approaching an injury. So when the news of Dale's death was released just after 7 p.m. surprise was followed by shock, and shock was followed by a sense of loss and grief.

Comparisons to this are hard to find although Lady Diana's death in a car crash does come to mind. The outpouring of grief was similar, the spontaneous gathering of people to mourn at places that were connected to both Earnhardt and Diana was similar.

Over the next several days the outpouring of grief continued. Thousands of people drove from all across the southeast and the country to North Carolina to lay a flower or place a memento in front of the Earnhardt offices, their home, or at one of the many tracks around the nation where Dale Earnhardt had taken the checkered flag. For others it was important just to make the pilgrimage and to be physically present at one of the sites associated with Dale Earnhardt.

As all of this was reported I heard one television correspondent say: "Truly this is a cross-section of our society gathered here today." Of course it wasn't. In the footage being shown and in

most all the pictures of these events that appeared in the media, finding a person of color was nearly impossible.

It was however a cross-section of Earnhardt's people. It was a collection of hard-working, god-fearing people, who come out America's white working class. It was a gathering of those people who struggle day to day and week to week to make ends meet; who spend their weekends vicariously participating in the thrills of racing. These were the people who identified with this good-ole boy who came out of North Carolina and into racing when it wasn't a millionaire's game. These are the people who still believe in some version of the American Dream wrapped around the myth of rugged individualism. These were Dale Earnhardt's friends, neighbors and soul mates.

They love this sport because they can identify with it. It is something they all have done, more or less, while racing each other on county back-roads and finding thrills at 110 rather than 210 miles per hour. They loved Dale's daring, his aggressiveness, his willingness to risk, and found it thrilling to watch precisely because life itself was up for grabs. The fact that the stakes are so high only serves to increase the appeal of this sport.

They loved Dale Earnhardt because once he got the millions he did not change, although it could be noted that his memorial service was produced by Dale Earnhardt Inc. Productions. He remained "The Intimidator" to the end, afraid of no one and willing to risk it all each week. They loved Dale Earnhardt because he seemed to share their values which he articulated as God, family, and country. As trite as this may seem to some, it is sacrosanct in the heartland of the NASCAR country.

For those who find all this just too much remember your reaction when someone in public life or sport you admired suddenly was gone. In an earlier generation it was Babe Ruth or Lou Gehrig, in more recent times it may have been Elvis, Diana, or JFK. In the world of sport, the outpouring over the death of Joe DiMaggio seems parallel, although without the element of shock.

As I wrote just two years ago, the southern redneck good-old-boy definitions and images of masculinity associated with NASCAR have never seemed authentic to me. The varied accents of the South have always sounded slightly foreign to my northern ear, and although my own speech has softened and my Minnesota accent is gone, I have not replaced it with the drawls or twangs of the NASCAR circuit. Most of these drivers remind me of people I

didn't like when I was growing up and therefore don't really want to know now. I will not be among the thousands who are buying Earnhardt memorabilia on the television shopping networks.

Nonetheless what happened this past week demonstrates that this still is a varied and amazing country. Dale Earnhardt is a hero to many, a role model for a large segment of American society. The reaction to his death is as authentic as any other reaction we have witnessed over the past century.

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