

NORTH CAROLINIANS *of* NOTE

Dale Earnhardt

NASCAR superstar stays close to his roots

By Stephanie Kelly

Before I moved to Charlotte, I had no idea what all the fuss was about. I had heard of NASCAR, but my childhood in suburban Connecticut wasn't exactly conducive to learning its ins and outs. I had a friend who knew a boy whose uncle was a Dale Earnhardt Jr. fan, but that was it.

I was a sophomore in high school my first year in Charlotte. My dad got tickets for the Coca-Cola 600 that summer at what was then Lowes Motor Speedway. When we got there, it was clear that we were in a different world than the small town I knew so well up North. I stepped out of the car and was immediately confronted by crop-tops, cut-offs and colorful tattoos in places I didn't know people ever got them.

Colonies of RVs sprawled across fields surrounding the speedway, each dotted with tailgating fans who had been there for days. Almost everyone sported a number on a hat or a shirt. Handwritten signs hung from fence posts: Honk if you love 88!

I was out of my element but irreversibly hooked. The energy was infectious. I needed a hat with a number. I needed a driver. Who was 88?

"That's Dale Jr.," Dad said. "He drives the Army car. His father was one of the best racecar drivers of all time, and he's from here. A hometown hero."

Dale Earnhardt Jr., 36, was born and raised in Kannapolis, northeast of Charlotte. Under the guidance of his NASCAR-superstar father, Earnhardt caught the bug.

"I remember when Dad would go out of town," Earnhardt told me via e-mail. "I would go race (stock cars) at Concord Motor Speedway. And we'd run around Concord afterward. Have fun cruising around and chasing girls. That was the funnest part growing up."

Earnhardt lives in Mooresville, outside Charlotte. His estate includes three go-cart tracks, a golf course and

a replica of an old-fashioned Western town, but he has simple tastes. On his website, he lists his favorite meal as a cheeseburger, and his restaurants of choice are Pie in the Sky and Steak and Shake.

"I was never really much for crowds and don't like busy places," Earnhardt said. "I guess I don't really know any different. I just ended up where I ended up."

His NASCAR career demands a great deal of travel, but Earnhardt said playing with his toys is what he misses most when he's on the road. His favorite hobbies are online racing and computer gaming.

"If I wasn't racing, I would be an I.T. guy," Earnhardt said.

Real-world racing remains the centre of his life, though. Upon winning the Nationwide Series title in 1998, Earnhardt became the only third-generation NASCAR champion. He and his father and grandfather, Ralph Earnhardt, hold 10 NASCAR championship titles among them.

Earnhardt was ranked 38th on BusinessWeek magazine's list of the 100 most influential people in sports in 2008. The Charlotte Observer named him one of the 10 most powerful people in NASCAR in 2007. That year the Dale Jr. Foundation was created in Mooresville to improve the education and confidence levels of underprivileged youth.

Earnhardt won NASCAR's Most Popular Driver Award seven years in a row and has been on the cover of more than 150 magazines. He wrote a New York Times best-selling book detailing his first NASCAR season: Driver 8. His hero is his father, and his proudest moment is taking first place at the Daytona 500 in 2004.

But that doesn't mean Earnhardt doesn't love racing at his home track.

"My favorite part about racing at



Courtesy of Hendrick Motor Sports

Charlotte is the history of the track and what's happened here over the years," Earnhardt said. "The fact that they have hosted the 600-mile event there is pretty unique. It's close to home and a lot of family gets to come, too. Growing up, that's the one track where I never missed a race when I was little."

The 1.5-mile oval track at the Charlotte Motor Speedway was created in 1959. In the 50 years since its first race, the Speedway has become the virtual epicenter of NASCAR.

"I always liked the trophies they had in Charlotte back in the day, the big old ones they had," Earnhardt said. "We had a lot of those around the house when I was growing up...Plus, just winning in front of the people who I grew up close to, even if I don't know them and even if they don't pull for me – winning in your hometown is a big deal."

Back on my first visit to the Speedway several years ago, Dad told me that he once met Earnhardt.

"I met him at some kind of NASCAR publicity event," Dad said, leading us through the turn-styles into the concourse. "Smart guy. Loves computers. Can't wait to see what he does on the track today."

www.DaleJr.com

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Interview. Dale Earnhardt Jr.

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