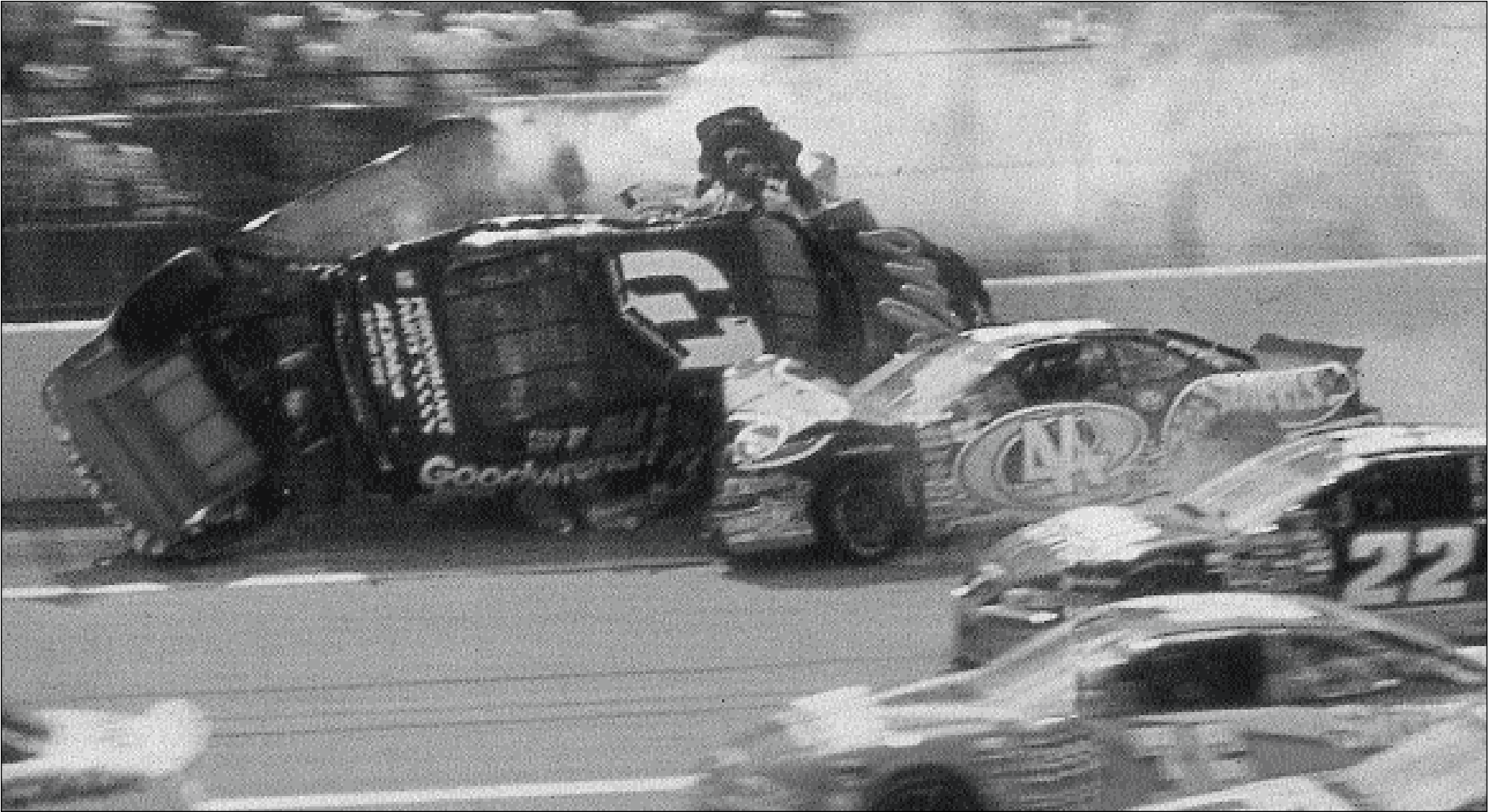




GREG VAN VOORHIS  
SPORTS EDITOR

# Farewell to a Champion: Dale Earnhardt 1951-2001



Wild ride Earnhardt survived a tango with Elliot at Tallageda in 1998

FILE

It wasn't to be. Dale Earnhardt could have been one of the very few to win the Daytona 500 as an owner and as a driver. But Death robbed him of yet another triumph; he who had defied death so many times, "The Invincible", "The Man", "The Master", "The Intimidator" is no more. On Sunday, February 17th, just short of his fiftieth birthday, Earnhardt died moments before he could accomplish this task.

And now it seems that the accident didn't have to happen at all. Recent reports indicate that he could have very well survived if his lap belt had not broken.

On Friday February 15th, NASCAR officials revealed that a broken seat belt inside the cockpit of Earnhardt's car likely contributed greatly to the blunt-force head injuries that proved fatal.

According to Dr. Steve Bohannon, head of emergency medical services at the Daytona track, when Earnhardt's No. 3 Chevrolet smashed at approximately 180 mph into a concrete wall on the race's final lap, the lower left seat belt came apart; it did not disconnect at the buckle but apparently gave way where the belt is sewn onto the buckle.

The report indicated that the result was that "Earnhardt's body was thrown forward and to the right during the crash," which caused his upper chest and chin to violently strike the steering wheel.

"The force transmitted up the mandible [lower jaw] on each side caused a fracture of the base of the skull," Bohannon said,

who was among those who tried to save Earnhardt's life.

"If his restraint system -- his belts -- had held, he would have had a much better chance of survival," Bohannon added.

The belt which came apart near a buckle was, made of woven nylon, and was designed to withstand crashes of more than 200 mph, although all restraint systems stretch at least a few inches on impact.

Another factor in Earnhardt's death could have been his old-fashioned open-face helmet. A closed-faced helmet might have made a difference, Bohannon said.

"It would have played a role," he said. "He would have had a different pattern of injuries."

The death of the 49-year-old racing great stunned the racing world and led to calls for better safety measures.

Like most drivers, Earnhardt shunned the use of the U-shaped HANS device -- for Head And Neck Support -- which many drivers find bulky and uncomfortable. It fits around the neck and is attached by a strap to the helmet and frame of the car. The HANS devices have been increasing in popularity since the deaths of racers Adam Petty and



Fans returned to Daytona international Speedway to pay their respects after learning of Earnhardt's death

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Kenny Irwin last year.

But Earnhardt was adamant against using anything that would make his job "easier". He was there to win, at all cost. "Get the hell out of the race car if you've got feathers on your butt," he would warn other rivals. As for his chances to stop racing, he said just last summer: "It's hard to say how long you should drive. Some people hang on too long just trying to get one last victory." This is exactly what happened to him.

Following the news conference, Dale

Earnhardt Jr. made his first extended public comments since the race, in which he finished second moments after his father crashed.

"I miss my father and I cried for him out of my own selfish pity," he said. "We just have to remember he's in a better place that we all want to be."

Earnhardt was buried in a private service in his hometown of Kannapolis.

*Edited by The Bronx Journal staff from various media sources*