

## Earnhardt a winner in numbers game

Contributed by Michael Vega  
Saturday, 22 September 2007

Dale Earnhardt Jr., you are now off the Budweiser Hot Seat.

The lame-duck driver of the No. 8 Budweiser Chevrolet revealed Wednesday in Dallas his plan to drive the No. 88 Chevrolet Impala SS for Hendrick Motorsports next year with dual sponsorship from existing Hendrick partners, the US National Guard and Pepsi-Cola.

When Earnhardt takes leave of his ride with Dale Earnhardt Inc. to join Hendrick's powerhouse four-car stable of four-time champion Jeff Gordon, defending champion Jimmie Johnson, and Casey Mears, he will drive an emerald green-and-white Mountain Dew AMP Energy Drink car in 20 points races and a blue-and-white National Guard car in the other 16 points races in the 2008 NASCAR Sprint Cup season.

"To be able to announce our new sponsorship partners, car number, and paint schemes for 2008 is a big relief for me, and I know it is for my fans as well," said Earnhardt, 32, who won 17 NASCAR Cup Series races, but no championships, in his nine years behind the wheel of the Budweiser-sponsored car. "This year has been full of major decisions and changes, and I'm really happy with the outcome."

Earnhardt, though, was elated by the fact that next season he'll be driving the No. 88, which his grandfather, Ralph Dale Earnhardt, drove in 1957. The list of others who have driven the No. 88 reads like an all-star roster: Bobby Allison, Donnie Allison, Buck Baker, Buddy Baker, Geoffrey Bodine, Ernie Irvan, Dale Jarrett, Benny Parsons, Fireball Roberts, Ricky Rudd, Rusty Wallace, Darrell Waltrip, and Joe Weatherly. In all, the No. 88 has been to Victory Lane 65 times since 1949, ranking ninth among the winningest NASCAR numbers.

"I like the fact the number has some history," Earnhardt said. "That makes me feel very proud to have it. That was what some of the other options sort of lacked; they didn't have any true history or true greatness behind them, no substance."

Earnhardt credited his sister and business manager, Kelley Earnhardt Elledge, for acquiring the rights to No. 88 after negotiating with Robert Yates, its previous owner. "I never thought a car number would create as much excitement as the car number did in this situation," said car owner Rick Hendrick.

But Hendrick should have known he was dealing with the wildly popular Earnhardt and his legion of loyal fans. "I was really trying to do good by my fans, because that was very important for them," Earnhardt said. "That was one of the more popular questions, would it have an '8' in it? What's the number? So I think they can be twice as happy about the situation.

"It's got to be sort of a relief for them. They've got to be pretty happy about it."

The announcement answered the two biggest questions Earnhardt faced - about his car number and sponsor - in the aftermath of his decision to defect from DEI to Hendrick Motorsports, where he will be joined by his cousin and crew chief, Tony Eury Jr., who announced he would be leaving DEI after the Nextel Cup race at Talladega, Ala.

With that settled, Earnhardt, who failed to make the cut for the 12-man Chase for the Nextel Cup Championship, said he will attempt to finish strong the remainder of the season with DEI, while keeping an eye on his future at Hendrick Motorsports.

"I've used the anticipation to motivate me for the rest of this season," Earnhardt said. "You know, there's all kinds of ways to find motivation; to work hard. I think I've said [it] quite a bit here lately, the integrity of the team that I'm currently driving for is really on the line here, not only for myself but the road guys, the road crew.

"It's really important that we work hard, we sort of make a good statement as we close this out and start a new chapter next year."