

# NASCAR Concussion Discussion

Most see new tool, safety team as positive steps

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Jamie McMurray says drivers should decide if they should race. “Only you know how you feel.”

Danica Patrick, Jamie McMurray and Kevin Harvick among NASCAR drivers weighing in on the topic on media day,

DAYTONA BEACH, FLA. NASCAR driver Jamie McMurray uttered words that make concussion experts cringe.

“It’s a doctor’s opinion,” McMurray told reporters at Daytona 500 media day Wednesday. “I wish they would leave that up to us. Only you know how you feel.”

McMurray held up one example of letting NASCAR drivers police themselves on concussions in star Dale Earnhardt Jr. The rub: Earnhardt raced three times after the wreck in June at Michigan International Speedway that was pinpointed as when he was concussed before he shut it down for the final 18 races of the Monster Energy Cup Series season.

He’s also a multimillionaire who could have walked away from racing years ago, a luxury few in sponsor-covered fire suits who filed in to talk to reporters here have. And let’s not forget Earnhardt admitted to not reporting concussion-like symptoms during the 2002 and 2012 seasons as he continued to race. But after he missed two races in 2012, he began taking concussions more seriously, visiting with specialists at UPMC Center for Sports Medicine in Pittsburgh. And last season, before he was sidelined again, he said he would donate his brain to science to help further studies.

“We like to sweep it all under the rug as drivers like we feel fine, nothing ’s wrong,” Danica Patrick told reporters Wednesday.

Patrick said she has suffered numerous concussions but has never missed a race because of injury. Before the 2012 season began, NASCAR officials reported they identified 29 concussions among their top three series since 2004. In the last five seasons, 21 more have been diagnosed, according to the Associated Press.

Drivers praised NASCAR's recently announced changes that give infield doctors a new concussion assessment tool and the addition of a traveling safety team, which bolsters continuity of care. 2014 champion Kevin Harvick said the latter change wouldn't have happened had it not been for the 10-member drivers council that pushed for a regular crew of responders that other series including IndyCar have had for years.

"I don't think that there was anybody in NASCAR that would have told you they need a traveling safety team," Harvick said. "The driver council pushed on that and voiced their concerns on that, and NASCAR listened and made it happen. When that conversation came up, (NASCAR officials) said there was not a need for it. All of a sudden, the more voices spoke up, they listened."

Harvick opined "the final straw" that made NASCAR open to the idea of a traveling safety team was the handling of Matt DiBenedetto, an Xfinity Series driver who was placed into the series' concussion protocol after a wreck at Texas Motor Speedway in November.

DiBenedetto was kept out of the Cup race a day after the wreck, although later testing showed he wasn't concussed.

"I was fine," DiBenedetto told USA TODAY Sports. "I went to the gym and lifted the next day."

DiBenedetto echoed Harvick and other drivers on the positive development of a traveling safety team, although currently the crew will only work Cup race weekends. "The more they can be familiar and know you individually, the better," DiBenedetto said. "It's more important than I ever would have thought before going through this process. I was naive. When I got into the infield care center, (the doctor) said, 'Oh, you're being quiet.' He took that into consideration. That was me just being frustrated and wanting to get in and out of the care center."

Brad Keselowski, the 2012 champion, said NASCAR "has to find a definitive way" to diagnose a concussion, although the series uses a combination of two tests — ImPACT and SCAT-3 — that are commonplace in other sports. The tests used by medical providers include memory retrieval, balance and an inventory of physical symptoms.

"Until we can do that, we are going to have two end results," Keselowski said. "Either drivers are going to sit out when they don't have a concussion or we are going to have long-term effects where drivers face multiple concussions and develop CTE."

Chronic traumatic encephalopathy is the debilitating degenerative brain disease caused by repeated head trauma. The only scientifically accepted way to diagnose CTE is in a postmortem examination of the brain.

But researchers are working on a way to diagnose CTE in a living patient and ways to identify concussions via blood draw or through brain imaging.

"There will be a lot of major developments when it comes to this research," Kevin Hrusovsky, executive chairman & CEO of diagnostic lab equipment maker Quanterix, told USA TODAY Sports.

Hrusovsky, however, said such testing is a couple of years away from commercial availability. "Until that tool exists, all of sports will be playing from behind," Keselowski said.