

JUNIOR'S RETURN FULL OF BUMPS

Truex had firsthand look at concussion's effects

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- Brant James bjames@usatoday.com USA TODAY Sports

DAYTONA 500

The 2017 Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series season kicked off with Daytona Speedweeks at Daytona International Speedway.

FEB. 19
Advance Auto Parts Clash Exhibition
2017 winner: Joey Logano

FEB. 19
Pole qualifying
Pole winner determined and lineups set for the Can-Am Duets.
2017 winner: Chase Elliott
Second: Dale Earnhardt Jr.

FEB. 22
Can-Am Duets
Sets lineup for Daytona 500; winners of each duel will start on second row.

SUNDAY
59th Daytona 500
Time/TV: 2 p.m. ET, Fox
2016 winner: Denny Hamlin

DAYTONA 500 RECORDS
MOST WINS 7 Richard Petty
CLOSEST FINISH (SECONDS) 0.01 2016: Denny Hamlin edges Martin Truex Jr. (above)

SOURCES: Daytona International Speedway and NASCAR

DAYTONA BEACH, FLA. Benchmarks were precious for Dale Earnhardt Jr. because progress had been maddeningly slow.

The boundaries between normal and what he prayed wasn't his new normal, between the NASCAR driver and the 42-year-old hoping to tread a straight line again, had become so blurred he wondered what his new reality would be.

So all-encompassing were his symptoms after a concussion suffered in a June wreck — which cost him the last 18 races of the 2016 season — that NASCAR's most popular driver was forced to stare at his car's floorboard as he and fiancée Amy Reimann drove from their Charlotte home to Raleigh to sample food for their New Year's Eve wedding. A road sign mocked him. Fixed gazes on spots across a room defied him. And then, one day, they didn't.

"My eyes were jumping around in my head real bad just riding down the street or in the car," Earnhardt said during Daytona Speedweeks. "Like a road sign jumping around. It was so annoying.

"I was scared to death I was going to be stuck with that all my life.

"So that was one thing I kept calling (neurologist Micky Collins) about. 'This isn't getting better!' The balance stuff was annoying, but if I had to live with it, I probably could do that. But I wouldn't be able to live with the eye thing.

"I woke up one morning, and my eyes were better. Looked out across (the) field and in (the) backyard. ... I could see clearer."

By fall, things had become “really good,” Earnhardt, said, allowing him to take his annual November trip with longtime friend Martin Truex Jr. to the Ohio property — the “chill place,” Truex calls it — they own for bowhunting deer. Better, but still recovering, Earnhardt brought along his visual training equipment and asked Truex to try it as a benchmark.

Sitting on a pit wall at Daytona International Speedway last week, Truex belly-laughed over the moment. Earnhardt, too, recounts the tale as if he’s shared it many times. It’s funny now. But it was terrifying then.

“I made Truex do it with me, so I could judge me off him and be like, ‘That’s how much further I still have to go to get to it.’ He’s like ...” said Earnhardt, mimicking Truex’s quick prance through the steps that were still befuddling him. “I’m like, ‘Son of a bitch.’ I get about six steps and stumble to the side.”

Truex has known Earnhardt for 15 years. Earnhardt was impressed enough with Truex’s ability to sign him for his Chance 2 team, and in 2004 and 2005 the New Jersey native won Xfinity Series championships for Dale Earnhardt, Inc. Truex’s career meandered through numerous Cup teams, success and misadventures before landing him in the ride of his career with Furniture Row Racing, where he has become a title contender and finished second in the Daytona 500 last February by a record 0.01 of a second to Denny Hamlin.

Truex recalls his immediate understanding of the difficulty Earnhardt must have been experiencing in November.

“He said, ‘I gotta do my exercises.’ I was like, ‘Exercises, what do you mean?’” Truex said. “He said, ‘Come here, I’ll show you.’ So he turns all the lights off and then turns on this weird crazy light, crap all over the walls. He says, ‘This is what I gotta do.’ I was like, ‘OK. I’ll try that. That’s easy.’ He had like four different things he had to do. I did ’em all back and forth, back and forth, real easy. He was like, ‘Dang, man, you make that look easy.’ I said, ‘Well, it is. I didn’t bump my head.’

“It was pretty interesting to see how it did affect him and didn’t affect me, so it kind of gave me a sense of what he was feeling. I couldn’t imagine how tough it would be to get through that, how simple something is to somebody who’s healthy, compared to how difficult something could be that seems easy.”

Earnhardt received so much advice from the beginning of his ordeal last summer that part of his daily process was filtering what information was useful and what was a distraction.

Earnhardt had much to assess: as a NASCAR icon, a cog in the sponsorship mechanism of Hendrick and JR Motorsports (which he co-owns with his sister, Kelley, and Rick Hendrick) and as a man soon to marry, with aspirations of fatherhood. It’s unclear whether a text Truex sent him soon after he stepped out of the No. 88 Chevrolet in July resonated. But in announcing that his reasons for returning were for his own desire to do this again, not out of obligation to others, Earnhardt fulfilled Truex’s wish.

“I straight up texted him just to see how he was doing. I was like, ‘Hey, what’s going on? How you feeling? Blah, blah, blah,’” Truex recalled. “I didn’t ask him what he was thinking. I just said, ‘Hey, make sure if you come back, you do it for you. Just make the decision for yourself, don’t think about anybody else, be selfish in this thing.’ I think he did.”

And it would be no surprise if the tale of the bowhunting trip remains a humorous anecdote in a comeback story.

That weird, crazy light machine is going back to the cabin this November. And Earnhardt is going to want a rematch.