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Earnhardt sets bar high with grand opening of Charlotte nightclub

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AP

Photo/Mike McCarn Belt buckles adorn the bar at Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s new stomping grounds, Whisky River.

CHARLOTTE, N.C. -- The man wearing blue jeans, a blue T-shirt with a long-sleeve gray T-shirt underneath and a blue baseball cap made his way past the mechanical bull, past the bar trimmed in belt buckles and past another bar with fiber optics in the counter, stopping along his way through this 10,000-square-foot room to shake hands and say hello to whomever he might run into.

He'd done this hundreds of times at other bars, yet this time was different.

Very different.

This was not somebody else's bar. This was his.

"I've been to so many bars and clubs and you have to meet the owners all the time, and to be the owner and be on that other side is surreal," [Dale Earnhardt Jr.](#) said Tuesday night.

Yes, NASCAR's most popular driver officially is the owner of his own nightclub.

It's called Whisky River, named after the bar at Earnhardt's Mooresville, N.C., home about 25 miles away that was named after the Willie Nelson song, albeit the "e" was dropped from whiskey to avoid legal issues.



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AP Photo/Mike McCarn Junior on his new hangout: "I think it's a bit of Southern gentleman and a little bit of Carolina country."

"No, Willie is not going to sue us," said J.R. Rhodes, the director of entertainment for JR Motorsports and the person Earnhardt credits with putting much of the bar plans in place. "That was the first thing I checked."

Earnhardt and Rhodes, a former bartender in Daytona, began talking about such a venture five years ago and have been working specifically on plans for this one for three years. The plan went from fantasy to reality when this prime spot in uptown Charlotte became available.

"As much as I'm happier than s--- about it, I think he might be even more excited than I am," Earnhardt said of Rhodes.

The son of seven-time NASCAR champion Dale Earnhardt was totally relaxed, soaking in every moment of this sneak preview before Wednesday night's private party and this weekend's grand opening.

The pressure he feels to perform on race weekends seemed as distant as his last victory -- May 2006 at Richmond.

"There's a stigma about how drivers can't do anything," Earnhardt said. "They have to focus on this, that and the other. Anytime you do anything or want to do anything or talk about anything, people want to question your focus or whatever."

Earnhardt's focus is just fine. He is third in points, 86 behind leader Jeff Burton during his first season with Hendrick Motorsports. He already has six top-10 finishes, which is half of his total from his final season at Dale Earnhardt Inc. a year ago.

He understands his fan base, by far the largest in the sport, is growing impatient for a victory. He knows some will say this bar will be nothing more than a distraction.

If anything, it'll be a place for him to escape and refocus while under the sport's largest microscope.

"I think people underestimate my drive and determination," Earnhardt said. "They always have. It's followed me around just like the pressure has, just like the name has. It's always there. It's OK. I've got to do things that might work out for me in my life.

"I might not always be driving that car. I would like to think that I could just race that car and at 50 I could quit and be all right, but I don't trust that. I don't know what the dollar is going to be worth when I'm 50."

No, Earnhardt isn't constantly on the phone wheeling and dealing, ordering beer and liquor and "positioning everything like I want it." He leaves those things to Rhodes and others within the organization whom he's carefully assembled around him.

"I'm not doing all that," Earnhardt said. "I'm racing in Phoenix [last weekend], for crying out loud."

Reminded he went backward after the final pit stop, finishing seventh after running in the top three most of the day, Earnhardt laughed and said, "I must have been on my cell phone, making sure everybody is having a good time."

Earnhardt wants people to have a good time here. He wants to create an atmosphere where even he can come and enjoy a night off without being hassled by fans for autographs and pictures, although he understands that'll be difficult to totally avoid.

He may even venture onto the mechanical bull, although he wasn't game on this night.

"I've rode one before at Coyote Joe's and it was a blast," Earnhardt said. "You won't ever see me on that thing before midnight, I'll tell you that."

In many ways this is a honky-tonk like Coyote Joe's, an establishment on the outskirts of town. Almost everything has a country western feel to it, from the oaken bucket woodwork around the bars and sidelights to the black and white cowhide covers on the bar stools and VIP booths. Earnhardt always has been fascinated with the western era. That's why he built a western town called Whisky River on the land near his home.

"Clint Eastwood," he said. "All the Clint Eastwood movies my daddy used to watch. I was a huge fan of 'Lonesome Dove' when it was a miniseries on TV. I've made a lot of people watch the entire thing in one setting. Several times. I just always liked that."

But Earnhardt doesn't want this to be a country western bar. He vows more rock 'n' roll will be played than Grand Ole Opry. His dream group to appear would be Foo Fighters, a band that is almost as far from Nashville as Toby Keith is from gangsta rap.

"I think it's a bit of Southern gentleman and a little bit of Carolina country," Earnhardt said of his place. "It just sort of fits the surrounding landscape. A lot of people bring in sort of a Miami-type sound and feel, or L.A. and Vegas. Those are good things. People enjoy that and not having to go that far to get that kind of a feel.

“

The things you don't want to run into are troublemakers, slobbering, messy drunks and that typical kind of stuff. ”

-- Dale Earnhardt Jr.

"I just feel like this is more what I'm about, what I enjoy, what I grew up around and what kind of bar I'd rather hang out in. Basically that's what it comes down to. If I'm sitting in a bar, not having a good time, this is everything I would change. This is how I would make it."

Earnhardt always has been fascinated by bars. He built a huge one in the basement of his first home so he would have a place to hang out with friends far away from the limelight of a public place.

"That one was ridiculous," Earnhardt said. "It was just black and purple everything. The tile was black and purple. The walls were black and purple. It was just ridiculous.

"It was nothing like this. This is way better. That one was a lot of fun to build and to play in, though. It was a good time."

Earnhardt had fun building this place as well. He helped design the main logo, featuring a large "W" and "R." Having fiber optics on top of the bar and lava lamps also was his influence.

But his biggest contribution, other than money?

"Orange," Earnhardt said. "Anything orange."

Yes, the man known for Budweiser red through most of his career loves orange, the same orange he rubs up against every time he gets close to Tony Stewart on the track.

There's even an orange bench in the VIP area, where eventually a television will be mounted in a table so Earnhardt can watch what's happening in every nook and cranny in the place.

He just hopes he doesn't have to monitor it for trouble.

"The things you don't want to run into are troublemakers, slobbering, messy drunks and that typical kind of stuff," he said. "You want to avoid controversy. You want to have a good time and have your friends with you. You've always got a buddy who's on the brink. You've always got one of those guys where someone's just got to look at him wrong, so you're always watching him all night.

"You want to go to a bar where you don't have to worry about that kind of stuff. Hopefully, we'll establish that sort of reality over time."

And for the record, all drivers are welcome at Earnhardt's place, regardless of what happens on the track the weekend before.

"There are just some we might not invite," he said with a laugh.

So is stepmother Teresa Earnhardt, with whom Earnhardt had a rocky relationship that led to his leaving the company his father built, on the invite list?

"No," he said, quickly moving to the next question.

Earnhardt hopes the place has long-term success, although bars and restaurants owned by celebrity athletes typically have a short life span. Michael Jordan, for example, opened a steakhouse in Chicago that was open only a few years.

But if this place succeeds, Earnhardt is susceptible to expanding into other cities. He just makes it clear that he's not in this for the money. He's got plenty of that.

"If I can break even and have a good time, then it's worth it," Earnhardt said. "That's the way I've always treated everything. That's why I don't make any money owning [Nationwide] cars. If I can just break even, I'm happy to be able to enjoy it."