

Earnhardt Jr. branches out into bar business

NASCAR star opens up 'Whiskey River' close to downtown Charlotte



NASCAR driver Dale Earnhardt Jr. stands at the bar during a grand opening ceremony for his Whiskey River Nightclub in Charlotte, N.C., Tuesday.

Mike Mccarn / AP

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CHARLOTTE, N.C. - Dale Earnhardt Jr. was dressed in his customary jeans, T-shirt and baseball cap and soaking it all in.

NASCAR's most popular driver already sells cars and jeans among other products. Now, the iconic driver with the legendary last name was standing in front of reporters explaining why the color orange dominates his new bar. The mechanical bull was directly behind him, and the giant dance floor and stage were to his right.

Earnhardt's handlers were all around him. Fans had paid several hundred dollars for access to VIP areas during the private grand opening earlier this week of Whisky River, which is across the street from Charlotte's downtown arena.

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For the moment, Earnhardt the brand had moved ahead of Earnhardt the driver. And the whispers were there, too. Why would Earnhardt be opening a bar when he hasn't won in 70 races?

"There's a stigma about how drivers can't do anything," Earnhardt said. "They have to focus, and 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."

It was probably inevitable Earnhardt would open a bar. There were all those stories of Club E, the homemade bar in the basement of his house as he was breaking into NASCAR's top circuit.

One of Earnhardt's close friends, J.R. Rhodes, was once a bartender in Daytona. They had talked about opening a bar for years, and Whisky River became a reality this month.

It's still a work in progress in a new development in this booming town full of construction cranes. When you get to the staircase off the street, a sign reads, "escalator and valet next week." The kitchen isn't operational yet, but the bar has blended Earnhardt's interests of country and rock and roll.

"I think it's a bit of Southern gentleman and a little bit of Carolina country," Earnhardt said. "It just sort of fits the surrounding landscape. I don't think of Charlotte or North Carolina as being like some of the clubs I see in this area. A lot of people bring in sort of a Miami-type sound and feel, or LA and Vegas. Those are good things. People enjoy that and not having to go that far to get that kind of a feel."

Earnhardt had a large role in how the bar looks. He likes the color orange and it dominates the logos on the walls, and there's an orange bench in the VIP room. The bar has a 1,200-square foot stage that can host large acts and Earnhardt hopes it will one day host the Foo Fighters. The dance floor is 1,500 square feet.

There are three bars, including a circular one that surrounds the mechanical bull opposite the dance floor.

"He had all the input in the world," said Bob Durkin of Bar Management Group, which Earnhardt hired to run the bar. "The look and feel, the way the club looks and how it lays out is all his image, his vision."

There's a mixed history of sports figures as bar owners. But Earnhardt's immense popularity and the prime location in a booming city works in his favor. The bar is a few blocks from the NASCAR Hall of Fame that is scheduled to open in 2010.

"I want you to come in and say 'Yeah, this seems just like Junior,' Earnhardt said. "That seems to be what's happened here."

Durkin promised the myriad of flat-screen TVs that dot the walls will be showing the races on weekends. Earnhardt hopes they'll be seeing his No. 88 Chevrolet in Victory Lane.

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While his move to Hendrick Motorsports this year has him third in the Sprint Cup standings, he's yet to win this year. His last victory was in 2006.

"It doesn't bother me if somebody comes up and says what you're doing isn't right, you should focus here," Earnhardt said. "That

doesn't bother me. I could care less. ... People think I'm on the phone wheeling and dealing, ordering the beer and liquor and positioning everything like I want it. I'm not the one doing that. I'm racing in Phoenix for crying out loud."

Earnhardt finished seventh there last weekend. He thinks he's close to winning, and he doesn't care if critics wonder if Whisky River is a distraction.

"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."