

Sports



NASCAR: Earnhardt's death prompted safety changes

Recommend

Be the first of your friends to recommend this.

Recommend this on Google

By: [ASSOCIATED PRESS](#) | BY PETER ST. ONGE
Charlotte Observer
Published: February 18, 2011

Weeks after Dale Earnhardt died, NASCAR's top executives gathered in the Washington, D.C., offices of Powell Tate, a public relations firm founded by the former press secretaries of Jimmy Carter and Nancy Reagan. It was an extraordinary meeting - not only because of the tragedy that prompted it, but because it had led the famously insular NASCAR to ask for help.

And NASCAR needed help in the spring of 2001. Officials had answered Earnhardt's death with mostly silence to the media - a point that a young Powell Tate executive named Ramsey Poston made to the room. "They had no plan," Poston remembered this month. "They hadn't thought about having a plan."

In response, NASCAR's chairman, Bill France Jr., explained exactly what he thought of the media - a colorful diatribe that caused former Carter press secretary Jody Powell to take a long drag off his cigarette. Complaining about the media might feel good in the short term, Powell offered with his deep Georgia drawl. "But in the long term," Poston remembers Powell saying, "being (expletive) off is not a plan."

It was a moment that seeded change - not only in how NASCAR communicated with others, but in the way it approached safety.

In the 10 years since Earnhardt's death, no drivers or spectators have died at races in NASCAR's three national series - now Sprint, Nationwide and Camping World Truck. In the 10 years before Earnhardt's death, 10 people had died in the same three series.

Earnhardt's death was the fourth in less than a year, and it prompted an examination of NASCAR and racing as a whole.

An Observer investigation that year found that dozens of people died each year at U.S. tracks big and small, and that patterns were evident that could save lives.

No one, however, seemed to be taking a thorough look.



Credit: DEAN HOFFMEYER/TIMES-DISPATCH

In the 10 years since Earnhardt's death, no drivers or spectators have died at races in NASCAR's three national series.

Related

[SPECIAL SECTION: Dale Earnhardt](#)

[Remembering Dale Earnhardt photogallery](#)

Whose driving style most resembles that of Dale Earnhardt?

Dale Jr.

7%

Kyle Busch

49%

Kurt Busch

4%

Jimmie Johnson

3%

Brad Keselowski

7%

Other

8%

No one

22%

Total number of votes: 180

The voting period on this poll has ended.

[» Read More](#)

But when Earnhardt hit the wall at Daytona on Feb. 18, 2001, NASCAR was shoved from the fence it had long straddled between what was safe and what put people in the stands.

Note: This poll is not scientific and reflects the opinions of only those Internet users who have chosen to participate. The results cannot be assumed to represent public opinion.

"When you have significant accidents in a short period of time like we did, it ought to make you focus your attention," NASCAR Chairman and CEO Brian France said this month.

"Everybody in the industry said, 'We have to do something, and we have to do it quick,' " said H.A. "Humpy" Wheeler, then president of Lowe's Motor Speedway.

That led to the meeting in Washington, D.C., and from that sprung dozens of other meetings and conversations.

Within a year, officials had put into place a plan that would lead to better data collection from crashes, mandatory head-and-neck restraints, crash-absorbing walls at NASCAR's top series tracks, and a new, safer car.

"The way that safety was looked at then was different," says Tom Gideon, director of safety, research and development at NASCAR's R&D Center in Concord. "It was more of a reactionary response: If somebody gets hurt, what do we do? How do we fix it?"

Now, says Gideon and others, NASCAR finds itself looking to anticipate safety issues - not catch up to them.

It is, officials say, a willingness to look inward and examine safety shortcomings - but also to look outside for assistance.

"They did kind of play things closer to the vest in the old days," said Dr. Steve Olvey, a motorsports safety expert who is director of the neuroscience intensive care unit at the University of Miami's Jackson Memorial Hospital.

"Now there's a lot of give and take with them, and I think that's helped them immensely."

The report came in two volumes, each with a plain blue cover and simple title: Official Accident Report - No. 3 car. It was jarringly clinical - words and pictures presented as evidence, from the blood-stained seat belt in Figure 21 to the 16-point list of injuries suffered by NASCAR's most popular driver.

Never before had NASCAR deconstructed an accident this thoroughly.

Most notable, perhaps, was that two of the report's authors - Dr. James Raddin, director of San Antonio's Biodynamic Research Corp. and University of Nebraska safety researcher Dean Sicking - participated in a two-hour news conference Aug. 21, 2001, along with NASCAR President Mike Helton, to explain the findings and answer reporters' questions.

For NASCAR, the sharing of that stage was a signal of changes already happening within the organization. By then, Poston and Powell had stressed in dozens of meetings and phone calls with NASCAR executives that public openness was important, but that the public needed to know that NASCAR had a comprehensive safety plan.

Some pieces already were available. Before 2001, NASCAR had developed plans for a Research & Development Center in Concord, which would be a central collection point for research.

Also, a handful of drivers already were wearing head-and-neck restraint devices manufactured by Atlanta-based HANS Performance Products.

But Earnhardt's death forced a coalescence of those pieces, according to Poston, now a NASCAR official: "It definitely accelerated everything NASCAR was doing."

It also prompted new initiatives encouraged by people outside of NASCAR -including the installation of data crash recorders in the three national series.

"The researchers highlighted the fact that we needed to gather data," says Mike Fisher, managing director of the R&D Center. "They wanted to look at things and see if there were any patterns."

Those patterns steered NASCAR's focus to three safety issues - head-and-neck restraints, track barriers and cars.

By the 2002 season, drivers were required to wear head-and-neck devices. Next came the tracks, albeit more slowly.

Since the late 1990s, Sicking had been developing energy-absorbing barriers - called SAFER barriers - for the Indy Racing League. The first barriers went up at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 2002, and NASCAR tracks began to follow two years later.


Recommend

Be the first of your friends to recommend this.

Recommend this on Google

Reader Comments

*Facebook Account Required to Comment. If you are not already logged into Facebook, please click the comment button to do so.



Posting as Ramsey Poston [Comment](#)
(Change)

 Post to Facebook

Facebook social plugin

ADVERTISEMENT



get fall fashion
for up to 60% less than
dept. stores

ROLL OVER
FOR FASHION
INSPIRATION

T.J. maxx

Richmond Times-Dispatch © 2012 World Media Enterprises Inc [Terms and Conditions](#) | [Work With Us](#)

Web Links: [Advertise With Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Email Alerts](#) | [Find Richmond Jobs](#) | [Mobile Alerts](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [Search](#) | [Times-Dispatch Shop](#) | [Public Notices](#)
Newspaper Links: [Subscribe to the Newspaper](#) | [Manage Your Accounts](#) | [TD-Digital](#) | [Kindle Edition](#) | [Place a Classified](#) | [Submit News Tips](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Photo Reprints](#)
Main Media Partners: [Richmond.com](#) | [Goochland Gazette](#) | [Mechanicsville Local](#) | [Midlothian Exchange](#) | [Powhatan Today](#) | [PolitiFact Virginia](#)

