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## Earnhardt Jr. not yet cleared; NASCAR evaluates testing

By Chris Jenkins, USA TODAY

After sustaining what team officials are calling a "minor" concussion in a crash at Dover (Del.) International Speedway, Dale Earnhardt Jr. is expected to receive medical clearance Wednesday from NASCAR.

But given the fact Earnhardt briefly lost consciousness Sunday and he hid a significant head injury from his team and NASCAR last year, he might be under more scrutiny this time.



"I don't know if 'skeptical' is the right word, but we have a little more experience" regarding head injuries, says Gary Nelson, NASCAR's managing director of research and development.

Unlike other racing series that employ and empower medical directors to oversee drivers' health, NASCAR drivers can be cleared by a doctor of their own choice. Earnhardt was examined Monday by respected Charlotte neurosurgeon Jerry Petty, who worked with driver Jerry Nadeau after his head injury this year and is familiar to the NASCAR community. Nelson says that Earnhardt has been examined by other doctors as well.

AP  
**Earnhardt Jr.**

"The doctors he's seeing are doctors who are familiar with him," Nelson says. "But at the same time they're doctors who (are qualified to) examine him. He's not seeing a podiatrist."

Without the benefit of advanced tests such as the one given to CART and IRL drivers, nobody involved in evaluating Earnhardt's readiness to drive — including Earnhardt — really knows whether he has recovered fully.

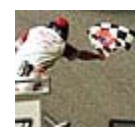
"Without some form of definitive testing, you don't know for sure," says physician Steve Olvey, the CART series' director of medical affairs.

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Doctors can look for lingering effects of a concussion, including headaches, dizziness and trouble sleeping — symptoms that can be hidden by an athlete who wants to stay in the game. Without testing before and after an injury, Olvey says, "You're just guessing when you let a guy back into competition."

CART and IRL use the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's ImPACT (Immediate Post-concussion Assessment and Cognitive Testing) program before they clear a driver with a head injury to race; the elite Formula One racing series is expected to adopt the program.

Earnhardt's admission that he hid the lingering effects of a head injury from NASCAR and his team brought additional scrutiny to NASCAR's already questionable history of policing driver head injuries. Ernie Ivan was allowed to race while wearing an eye patch in 1995, and officials didn't realize injured driver Ricky Rudd propped his eyelids open with duct tape during a race in 1984.

NASCAR officials said last year that they would take a look at ImPACT. They did, and team owner Chip Ganassi had his three Winston Cup drivers take the test on their own. But NASCAR hasn't made it mandatory, at least not yet. "We certainly have discussed it, and we're also looking at alternatives," Nelson says.

The 20-minute test, which is administered by computer, measures a person's reflexes, concentration ability and memory. Athletes take the test before the season to establish a baseline score, then take it again if they are injured. If the post-injury score doesn't measure up to the baseline score, the athlete sits down.

In a morning warm-up session for the CART race in July in Cleveland, driver Tiago Montiero crashed into a tire barrier. Although he said he felt fine and a CAT scan taken at a hospital appeared normal, Montiero failed the ImPACT test and officials sat him. "In the past, we would have let him race," Olvey says.

Procedures are similar in the IRL, where doctors sidelined Gil de Ferran for the last race of the 2002 season because he had a concussion — even though de Ferran had a shot at winning the championship.

But the test also can help a driver prove he's ready to race. CART used to have a steadfast rule that any driver who was knocked unconscious in a crash, however briefly, had to sit out at least one race. A positive ImPACT test could get a driver back in the seat more quickly.

"It can work to their benefit as much as against them," Olvey says.

Earnhardt missed an appearance Tuesday at Lowe's Motor Speedway, where he was scheduled to help track officials promote next month's race.

"We understand he's on crutches, but we were hoping he could still come out," track spokesman Jerry Gappens said. "But he needs to stay home and rest, and hopefully he'll be able to compete this weekend."

Earnhardt is seeking a record fifth consecutive victory this weekend at Talladega. Including the Busch Series event in April, Earnhardt has won five of the last five races he's entered at the 2.66-mile superspeedway.

According to his Web site, he spent Monday at his Dale Earnhardt Inc. race shop making adjustments to the No. 8 Chevrolet that would allow him maximum comfort in the race car.

Earnhardt was injured late in Sunday's race, crashing hard into the wall. He was briefly knocked out and taken to a local hospital for evaluation. He finished 37th in the race, and dropped from second to fourth in the Winston Cup standings.





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