



iRacing allows fans and drivers to hone their skills

Earnhardt worked on development of game long before it was available to public

By Joe Menzer, NASCAR.COM
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The month of May was fast approaching when Marcus Smith, track president at Charlotte Motor Speedway, decided he wanted to do something special to commemorate the long-awaited public unveiling of the largest high-definition television screen in the world at his facility.

Why not ask the most popular driver in NASCAR to come out and play a video game on the huge TV? A couple phone calls were made, and soon enough **Dale Earnhardt Jr.** was on board with the idea and quite enthusiastic about it.

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This wasn't just your normal video screen, of course, and nor was it your normal video game. Earnhardt has always been passionate about the iRacing game that he got to play that day in May.

In fact, Earnhardt helped develop it -- and credits playing it regularly to keeping him sharp in his day job, which is driving stock cars at ridiculously high speeds on the Sprint Cup Series circuit.

"It's fun," Earnhardt said. "And I think it keeps me sharp."

Earnhardt said it has helped him this season as he has enjoyed a resurgence in the Sprint Cup point standings. Heading into this Saturday's race at Kentucky Speedway, he's seventh.

Carl Edwards, who is currently second in points, said when he thought he was going to run the Nationwide Series race recently at Road America -- a track with which he was unfamiliar -- he spent a solid two hours on iRacing to prepare for it. Edwards thought he was going to have to fly from Sprint Cup practice in Sonoma, Calif., and jump into his Nationwide car at Road America in Elkhart, Wis., and qualify without practicing. (He ended up changing his mind at the last minute and didn't run the Nationwide event).

"I spent time on Road America where they had an open practice. It was really cool," Edwards said. "There were about 60 guys and it was just like a real practice session. One of the guys sent a set-up over digitally and we put that in and talked to him a little bit and followed him around the track. It really helps, I think. ... I am relying on that iRacing stuff to get me up to speed in a situation like that."



Dale Earnhardt Jr. shows off his iRacing skills while helping to launch Charlotte Motor Speedway's HDTV screen in May.

CMS

The other side

Not all NASCAR drivers agree with Earnhardt, Edwards and other enthusiastic backers of iRacing and other forms of simulation driving in terms of how it can help them prepare for actual races. Others, including [Kasey Kahne](#) and [Elliott Sadler](#), insist that they get nothing of professional value out of iRacing or other simulated racing games and therefore rarely, if ever, pursue them.

"I've never done it and don't really know anything about it," Sadler said. "I don't think you can learn anything off it, either, but hey, different strokes for different folks. I guess it's a tool that some people can use to help them, but it doesn't work for me. I'm such an outdoors guy. I play a lot of golf; I play a lot of softball; I play flag football. I'm just outdoors, training or doing something all the time; I don't like to sit inside doing that.

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"I understand where we're always looking for something to give you that extra edge and if other guys can use that to their advantage, more power to 'em. My plan is if I'm outside all summer long in the heat, no matter when or where I get in the race car it's not going to bother me."

Kahne added that he'd rather look over an unfamiliar track in person or on video before going to it, rather than trying to drive it on iRacing.

"Some of it is so realistic as far as the tracks," Kahne said. "You can really see it before you go to it, and I guess that has to help. All I ever did was watch it on TV, or go to the track and watch it there before I raced it. I just never did iRacing. I never did video games. I've never been good at it.

"To me it can easily help you understand how it looks going into a corner. But you can get that off TV, too, or just going to a track and paying attention that way. Don't get me wrong. I think it's awesome. But just because you're a good iRacer doesn't mean you're suddenly going to go to Charlotte Motor Speedway and be able to qualify first for an actual race."

To that line of thinking, Earnhardt shakes his head with a hint of disbelief. It's pretty obvious he will soon be attempting to change Kahne's mind once Kahne becomes a Hendrick Motorsports teammate beginning next season.

"I'm open-minded about it. I'm not as critical of the simulation as some people. I don't sit down there and ask myself, 'Am I really getting anything on the professional side out of this experience?' But I believe anytime you play a video game or any kind of simulation like that, I think it helps with your reaction time," he said. "There are just some very simple things that it helps you with mentally -- and iRacing is the most realistic simulation of the actual racing atmosphere, so how can it not? How can it not help you somehow?"

The background

To understand why Earnhardt is so bullish on iRacing, a little background is required. Earnhardt worked on development of the game for years before it became available to the general public.

He helped test the product for four years before the online racing service was opened to the public in August of 2008. NASCAR and iRacing.com Motorsports Simulations partnered in May of 2009 to create a NASCAR-sanctioned online racing series that is licensed by NASCAR and organized and hosted by iRacing.



NASCAR iRacing

The World Championship Series season includes 18 races in 39 weeks and races take place every other week at 9 p.m. ET Tuesday.

[Schedule](#)
[Standings](#)
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"They've been developing it since '02 and I got in on the beta testing around '04," Earnhardt said.

The iRacing.com company was founded in September of 2004 by Dave Kaemmer and John Henry. Kaemmer was co-founder of Papyrus Design Group, developers of some early-on racing simulation games that included the highly popular NASCAR: 2003 Season. Henry is principal owner of the Boston Red Sox in Major League Baseball and Fenway Sports Group -- the co-owner of NASCAR's Roush Fenway Racing organization. Henry also happens to be an avid simulation racer himself who has long said he's pleased with how iRacing has brought realistic racing simulation to average fans at prices they can afford.

"This is one form of racing that is affordable to the average racing fan," Henry said when iRacing first partnered with NASCAR. "We provide our members with the opportunity to develop the same driving skills they see their favorite NASCAR stars using every weekend, for a fraction of the cost of their monthly phone bill."

The company's subscription numbers bear out Henry's contention. Even in a down economy, they've more than doubled since August of 2009 to more than 25,000 members worldwide today. Fans -- and NASCAR drivers themselves -- can sign up for as little as \$7.46 per month for a two-year membership. They also can sign up for memberships shorter in length if they're just test-driving the product, such as \$12 for one month or \$10 per month for a three-month commitment.

The company also has been aggressive in negotiating rights with International Speedway Corp., Speedway Motorsports Inc., and other racing-related organizations to "build" new virtual tracks. One of the latest to be added to the NASCAR-sanctioned mix was Iowa Speedway. There currently are 19 tracks where Sprint Cup events are held where iRacers can compete, as well as the aforementioned Road America where a Nationwide race is held. The total number of all tracks available -- including other types -- is up to 46 from 12 just two years ago.



The first race of the season started out clean, but it didn't take long for the cautions to fly. Florida's Ray Alfalla eventually took the checkers and is currently first in the standings. [iracing.com](http://www.iracing.com)

Stepping it up

The increased involvement with NASCAR has had a trickle-down effect, allowing iRacing.com to stage five different online racing series officially sanctioned by NASCAR: NASCAR iRacing.com Series World Championship (NiSWC), NASCAR iRacing.com Pro Series and NASCAR iRacing.com Class A, Class B and Class C Series. NASCAR.com regularly covers NiSWC races and the series champion receives a cash prize of \$10,500, along with an expense-paid trip to the Sprint Cup season finale at Homestead-Miami Speedway where they are honored during the pre-race ceremonies.

So while the iRacing company is more about making some money and promoting the sport by getting the average fan involved -- rather than providing simulation that a driver can actually use to his or her advantage on the race track -- having someone with a high profile such as Earnhardt endorse it obviously doesn't hurt the bottom line. Earnhardt not only was involved in development of its NASCAR-based products but also in hopefully affecting future improvements as a member of iRacing's competition committee.



Dale Jr. and Marcus Smith show off their iRacing skills at CMS in May.

Earnhardt also won the inaugural iRacing.com Series World Championship race in February of 2010 and has raced occasionally in the past with series regulars on Tuesday nights at 9 p.m. when the official events are held. But he's more likely just to join in a non-official event when he feels like it, or get in some practice runs on the next track he'll be visiting.

But he said he does enjoy iRacing against fans.

"It's fun, and I don't feel pressure to beat 'em every time," Earnhardt said. "I hope they get a kick out of it. But not all of 'em will. Just like up in the grandstands you've got some people who pull for you and some people who hate you. It's the same way in the iRacing community. There is a forum and there's a lot of communication going on there. Half of 'em are telling you you're doing a good job and half of 'em are telling you you're overrated."

"So it just goes with the territory. You just try to move around and blend in and have fun. But most of the time, when I do get the opportunity to sit down and really go at it, those guys are fun to race and they can whip your tail. That's just the way it goes sometimes. You join a race and whoever you're paired up with is who you race. Normally they try to pair you up with guys who are of your skill level, but you don't have a choice in the matter as to who you're running against."

Blake Davidson, NASCAR managing director of licensed products, helped negotiate the deal between the governing body and iRacing. He said developing an online racing series was the vision of the late Bill France Jr.

"Bill France Jr. had the original vision for this series more than 10 years ago," Davidson said when the partnership was formed in 2009. "He foresaw a day when NASCAR fans could experience NASCAR's side-by-side racing from the comfort of their own homes. That day has now come."

"The iRacing product is so realistic that a number of our drivers are iRacing members. ... From the beginning, these drivers have raved about the incredible accuracy of the cars and the tracks that iRacing has produced. Their involvement makes the experience even more authentic."

Among the drivers who were quick to sign up for iRacing in addition to Earnhardt, were [Brad Keselowski](#), [A.J. Allmendinger](#), [Marcos Ambrose](#), [Michael McDowell](#) and [Colin Braun](#). Keselowski, who later drove an Earnhardt-owned car in the Nationwide Series, said he first started getting to know Earnhardt through racing with him online and credited his third-place finish at Darlington Raceway earlier

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understand what the corner entrances look like, and where the apexes are, just getting on and off the track -- where pit road is, what the entrance to pit road looks like and things like that. It can be very tricky at some race tracks, and this gives you kind of a heads up.”

But it's not just for young drivers. When **Jimmie Johnson** thought iRacing might help him improve on road courses last year, Earnhardt actually went to Johnson's house to help him set up the system that Johnson later credited, at least in part, with helping him win the first road-course race of his career at Infineon Raceway. Earnhardt said he wanted it "done right."

No "fartin' around"

Earnhardt chuckles when he's asked what it means to be a member of the iRacing's competition committee.

"That just means they get together and hold conference calls about the future of the company and the direction they want to go, and new things they're working on," he said. "I just try to give them the customer's point of view, and try to help them a little bit with just general racing knowledge."

As far as those in racing who use it both for fun and for serious preparation to hone their skills, everyone does it differently. Edwards said he has "a hot seat and my PC is set up and everything. I have worked a lot on that. I haven't done that lately because there is a certain limit to how much it can help you here, but it can definitely help you with braking points and where the speed is on a road course, for sure."



Marcos Ambrose gets some iRacing seat time. (iRacing.com)

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"The other drivers who might try out iRacing and don't believe that it can help them are pretty narrow-minded. I wish them all the luck in the world. It's a tool to help you stay sharp, especially for young drivers."

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this season in large part to getting to know the place on iRacing. Earnhardt said it benefits younger drivers greatly, noting that as a Nationwide Series team owner, he is pleased when he sees his drivers such as **Josh Wise** attempting to gain experience on iRacing -- especially now that there is less and less testing.

"I don't encourage him to do it. I leave it up to him," Earnhardt said of Wise. "But he's on there quite a bit."

Not only is less testing at actual tracks in real vehicles available to younger drivers desperately seeking seat time, but what testing is available is far more expensive to operators than having the drivers sit down in front of a computer and go iRacing. Those are factors to be considered as well, Earnhardt said.

"If I had never raced at Milwaukee and I was going to go race there in a Nationwide car or a Star Mazda car or something like that, that would be the perfect way to get acclimated with the track," Earnhardt said. "It would help you

understand what the corner entrances look like, and where the apexes are, just getting on and off the track -- where pit road is, what the entrance to pit road looks like and things like that. It can be very tricky at some race tracks, and this gives you kind of a heads up."

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Earnhardt keeps his set-up simple. He does have a three-paneled arrangement of computer monitors so he sees not only in front of him but also out the sides just like he would in a real car. But it's not like he pulls on a firesuit or has to strap himself in before getting after it.

"It's nothing special. I just have a computer desk and monitors and a steering wheel -- because at the same computer, I play Call of Duty and surf the Internet and talk to my friends," he said. "So it's not like I have a racing pod or anything like that. Some guys do. I do other things at the computer, too, so I don't need to be laying in a race car to be able to sim race, you know?"

He added that he gets perhaps the most value out of iRacing when he knows his Sprint Cup team is going to a non-sanctioned NASCAR track to test, and he can first run some laps at that track on iRacing.com. He said Virginia International Raceway is a perfect example.

"When we go to Virginia to test at the road course, I can sit here and tell you that I know the race track and that I know how to get around it -- because I've been there. But I only go there once a year, if that. And we go there for one day. And if I didn't have iRacing I would spend the first hour of that day farting around, just trying to get up to speed," Earnhardt said. "We wouldn't learn nothin', because we couldn't use the telemetry -- because I'm fartin' around, trying to figure out how to get fast."

"If I go on iRacing and run that track -- because they have that configuration -- I probably can cut that down to 10 or 15 minutes of farting around. Those are the little things where I think it really helps. Because I've done that before, and it's helped me a lot. Normally when we go test at a place like that, I'm not a road racer so when I go test at a place like that it takes me some time to get up to speed. And then I'll go tell the crew chief, 'I don't know what we're learning here, because I'm not up to speed yet.' When I do iRacing and then we go to Virginia, as soon as we hit the track for that first run, I'm like, 'All right, man. I'm at my target speed. I'm at my limit. We can start using this data and understand what the car is doing, and start working on the car.'"

Earnhardt said he can't stress it enough how much he believes it helps him. And for young drivers seeking seat time, he said it beats every other alternative short of finding a real car to run on a real track.

"I think there is definitely some mental sharpness that comes with doing the iRacing. At least for me, it does," Earnhardt said. "And for the young guys, it helps you if you've never been to that race track before, or if you haven't run there a lot. The simulation is exactly like the real thing, so you can go out there and run

the line and you can understand how to get around the race track. It's a help.

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