

## Over the Rainbow Warrior: Letarte Leads the Way for Dale Jr., No. 88 Team

*Guest Column By Cathy Elliott*

No one knows what the outcome of the race will be when the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series heads to Kansas each year; if the season so far has taught us anything, we have learned to expect the unexpected.

But there is one thing we can always count on. I guess it is only natural to use probably the most famous thing about Kansas (sorry, KU Basketball) as a basis for comparison when NASCAR comes to town. "The Wizard of Oz" is not only one of the best, and best-loved, films of all-time, but also one of the most frequently quoted.

Fairy tales and fantasy worlds do not exist solely for our entertainment. Rather, they can encourage us to look at familiar things we really know and care about – like NASCAR, for example – in entirely new ways. So you don't have to be Nostradamus to predict that when Kansas rolls around on the schedule, we're off to see the wizard before the first lap is ever run.

I'm probably not alone in the fact that I still get mildly irritated when I find myself involved in a conversation with one of those "NASCAR is nothing but go fast, turn left" people. It gets my hackles up, but I have learned that instead of getting defensive, it is much more effective to fight fire with some factual

NASCAR heat. This time of year, when everyone is all worked up about baseball, I like to come back at them with a quote from another famous movie, "Bull Durham" – "This is a very simple game. You throw the ball. You catch the ball. You hit the ball."

Then, when they launch into the usual speech about superior timing, strategy and 90 mph blink-of-an-eye fastballs, I explain that, on average, it takes between 1/10 and 4/10 of a second to blink an eye. Margins of victory in NASCAR, by comparison, can be measured in mere thousandths of seconds. Hit that, Albert Pujols.

Figuring out how to beat the blink of an eye requires some very big brain power.

Even with nothing more than a simple piece of string and a tiny shard of metal, threading the needle can be a risky business. Throw in 43 stock cars weighing in at 3,400 pounds each, zipping along at 185 mph or so, and you definitely want to shimmy through that eye on the first attempt. Missing it and pricking your finger could prove to be a very messy proposition.

Realizing the risk but going forward anyway takes a lot of courage.

On May 29, when the Coca-Cola 600 went to a green-white-checkered finish, it officially became the longest race in NASCAR his-

tory. Regardless of their favorite driver, on that night, fans in the grandstands and in living rooms all across America collectively rose to their feet and held their breath as Dale Earnhardt Jr. came out of Turn 4, on his way to the checkered flag.

He knew he couldn't make it. "We were running out of gas and, we knew it. We played our hand ... If we had won, it would have been a gift," Earnhardt, who finished seventh, said after the race. "We're going to be around for a long time, and we'll get plenty, don't worry."

To soldier on, to never give up, to run flat-out when you desperately want to win but know you're probably going to lose in the end, shows an awful lot of heart.

"Dale has brought a fresh breath, a fresh voice, a fresh approach to our race team," No. 88 crew chief Steve Letarte said this week about working with Dale Earnhardt Jr. this season.

"There was nothing wrong with Jeff Gordon. Sometimes change is necessary, and I think Dale Jr. has brought that change to this race team," Letarte continued. "We are starting to approach tracks a little more open minded, a little more flexible than what we planned on running."

Plucky Dorothy Gale and her pals had to navigate their way through some pretty crazy stuff



in order to reach their goals. They always had the power; they just had to figure out to find it, to dig deep and use their special skills in order to get there. A brain. A heart. The nerve. Sound familiar?

NASCAR, with all its bright colors, loud noises and narrow escapes, may sometimes seem as exotic and confusing as Oz. But when you dig your way through the twisting maze of cranky apple-hurling trees, menacing flying monkeys, deceptively pretty poppies and chic red shoes, you can find what you are looking for waiting at the end. The guy who gets there first may change from week to week, but the destination never does.

Whether you call it Victory Lane or home, there's really no place like it.

## NASCAR Statement Regarding Richard Childress and Kyle Busch Incident

NASCAR Statement – June 5, 2011: "NASCAR has reviewed the incident involving Richard Childress and Kyle Busch after the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series race Saturday at Kansas Speedway. We have met with all parties involved and have determined what happened yesterday is unacceptable and will not be tolerated by NASCAR.

Richard Childress's actions were not appropriate and fell far short of the standard we expect of owners in this sport. We have met with Childress this

morning and made our position very clear to him. Further, we expect he will make it clear to all in his organization to ensure this situation does not escalate any further. We will announce our actions regarding this incident Monday.

Kyle Busch remains on probation with NASCAR and we continue to watch his actions carefully. However, we have determined that Kyle's involvement in this incident does not violate his probation and no further action is required."

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