

KELLEY EARNHARDT MILLER

WITH BETH CLARK



DRIVE

9 LESSONS TO WIN

IN BUSINESS AND IN LIFE

FOREWORD BY DALE EARNHARDT JR.

MY STARTING POSITION

Any racing fan knows that starting position matters. Where a car is when the green flag waves can have a huge impact on the outcome of the race. The pole position—the inside of the front row—is most desirable and is usually awarded to the car and driver with the best qualifying time for each race. Among the remaining positions, some are considered better than others. A few are viewed as basically unwinnable, depending on the track. Over the course of a race, all sorts of developments can arise, and a car that holds the lead for almost an entire race can lose at the last minute. That fast-paced unpredictability is part of what makes our sport exciting.

What's true at the racetrack is also true about life: where and how we start matters. Our early days don't have to dictate the rest of our lives, but they do influence and determine much about the way we think and feel, the way we relate to others, the way we approach and solve problems, our work ethic, our likes and dislikes, and our priorities.

To use a racing analogy, I could say I got the green flag in Concord, North Carolina, on August 28, 1972. That's the day I was

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born to a young, ambitious amateur racecar driver named Dale Earnhardt and his wife, Brenda. My dad was twenty-one years old, and Mom described him as “determined and focused” at that time. “He lived very much in the present,” she recalled. “He did everything day by day. He didn’t think about next week; he only thought about the next race.” My mom supported my dad in every way she could. Reminiscing, she shared, “Dale and I both loved life. We had a lot of fun and made a lot of good memories.”¹

My mom was thrilled to have a baby, and she always said that being a mother came naturally to her. Having been raised in a family with seven siblings, she dreamed of spending her life surrounded by children and the proverbial white picket fence. She hungered for stability the way my dad hungered for adventure.

My paternal grandfather, Ralph Earnhardt—a NASCAR legend—was still living when I was born. When he first started racing, he worked various day jobs, and on the side he raced on dirt tracks to make extra money. By 1953 he had enjoyed enough success on the racetrack to begin racing full-time. My grandfather made a name for himself by keeping his car in the best possible condition in every race, and he won numerous awards during the 1950s and ’60s, including the 1956 NASCAR Sportsman championship, which is the equivalent of a NASCAR Xfinity Series championship today.

My grandfather died in 1973, when I was about a year old, of a heart attack while working on parts for someone’s car. Legend has it—and some websites report²—that my dad found his father dead on the garage floor, midway through working on a car. My aunt Cathy, my father’s sister, said, “We have tried to correct the ‘drama’ about Daddy dying in the shop, but it makes a better story than what actually happened.”³

In reality, the wife of the man whose car parts my grandfather had serviced that day came to pick them up from him. My grandfather told her he was going into the kitchen, a few steps away from the shop, and would be right back. When he didn't return, she found him deceased on the kitchen floor. Aunt Cathy is right; the true story is not as good as the myth!

Two years after I was born, my brother Dale Jr., to whom I'll refer as simply "Dale" in this book, came along. We've always been close, but back then I had no idea that, more than forty years later, we'd work closely together co-owning JR Motorsports, with me managing the business aspects of his life and career and overseeing his brand. But that's where we are today, and we're both thankful for the opportunity.

Dale and I have an older half brother, Kerry, from our dad's first marriage. Though we never lived in the same house and I didn't meet him until I was thirteen years old and Kerry was sixteen, Dale and I now have a good relationship with him and his family.

I have no memory of my parents as a married couple, nor does Dale. They separated in 1976, when I was four years old, and divorced in 1980. I do remember that they treated each other with civility and got along well most of the time. After their separation, Dale and I lived with our mom. She often worked second- or third-shift jobs, and perhaps my protective nature toward Dale has its roots in those years, when I first stepped into my role as a "mother hen" for him. In many situations, we had only each other to turn to and lean on for support and understanding, and those years became an important bonding period for us.

I felt I needed to compensate for Mom's not being home with us. Relatives stayed with us overnight while she worked, but they were

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not with us twenty-four hours a day, so I learned to cook and do laundry at an early age. Dale was short and skinny and insecure in certain ways, so I did my best to support him, encourage him, and meet his practical needs.

We saw our dad occasionally. I remember playing T-ball as a child and being so excited because my dad had come to the game. I also remember his taking my cousin and me to his mother's house in his very fast Trans Am. We visited our grandmother Earnhardt often, and Dale and I spent a great deal of time with her, especially after school when Mom worked.

Even though our nuclear family didn't live together and I didn't see my dad as much as I wanted to, Mom created a happy life for us, and I'll always appreciate that.

CHANGING LANES

In 1981, when I was eight years old, tragedy struck Mom, Dale, and me. Early one morning in May, about three weeks before school would be out for the summer, our rented house burned. We were living small paycheck to small paycheck, and money was tight. Suddenly, my mom found herself with no home and no money, unable to provide for two young children.

But things were going well for Dad. He had recently won his first championship, and he had greater financial resources than she did. So she made the heartbreaking decision to send Dale and me to live with him while she moved to her mother's house in Norfolk, Virginia.

Dale and I both felt we had changed lanes. Suddenly, everything

was different. All that was familiar had gone up in smoke—not just our house but also our furniture, our photographs, our clothes, our toys, and our favorite things. To say that it was not a happy time for us is an understatement, especially with the loss of our everyday relationship with our mother.

Dad was doing well enough in his racing to afford a nanny to stay with Dale and me full-time. He had been the Rookie of the Year in 1979 and was the NASCAR champion in 1980. When he was away on weekends, Mom came to stay with us, which helped our family feel a bit more solid.

In July 1982, Dad sustained a broken leg in a race at Pocono Raceway. I was surprised to learn that a woman named Teresa had visited him at the hospital after the accident. I knew Teresa. Dad had met her before he and my mom divorced, and he dated her off and on for several years. But since the beginning of 1982, he'd had another girlfriend. Dale and I knew her well, and we'd spent time with her and my dad. At the time of the accident, I assumed Dad was seeing her and that he and Teresa were "off." They were not. They were very much on, and on November 14, 1982, Teresa and Dad married.

Teresa was twenty-four years old, seven years younger than my dad. She had no children of her own and no experience dealing with a ten-year-old and an eight-year-old, much less a traumatized ten- and eight-year-old. As any children would, Dale and I wanted our mom, but because of the fire and her job situation, we had no choice but to live with Dad and Teresa. Being on our own with two newlyweds was not easy for us. We turned to each other whenever we were upset, sad, or confused because we felt our dad was unavailable to us.

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Thankfully, Dad made enough money racing to be able to provide for our material needs. In his mind, a father's job was to offer his children food, shelter, and clothing—and he did that for us. Our physical needs were met, but Dale and I both had emotional and relational needs that went unfulfilled for many years. As we grew older, Dad became more and more involved in racing and had less time to be part of our lives. In addition, our relationship with Teresa was difficult.

Dad began to enjoy unprecedented levels of success on the racetrack, and almost before Dale and I knew what was happening, he was famous. He won NASCAR Cup Series championships in 1980, 1986, 1987, 1990, 1991, 1993, and 1994. We were now able to afford things we had never had before, and people in public would say hello to our dad or ask for his autograph.

By then, Dad had earned his nickname, “the Intimidator,” and he took it seriously. He was very aggressive on the racetrack, and he didn't mind hitting a bumper to gain an advantage over another car. I've never met a NASCAR fan whose feeling about my dad was neutral; people either loved him or hated him. People who loved his style on the racetrack thought he was magical. People who hated it called him a dirty driver.

We were totally surprised and unprepared for the judgment people had toward our dad, whether it was positive or negative. Sometimes I overheard it. Sometimes people said it directly to us. It was intense—and school was no escape from the pressure. We just wanted to be normal young people, but other students referred to us as “rich” and “spoiled,” and acted as though they thought everything in our lives was wonderful.

I quickly learned that when you're the daughter of a celebrity,

whether that person is an athlete, a movie star, a rock singer, or a politician, people make many assumptions about you. They think your life is glamorous, fun, and happy all the time. They can even become jealous, wishing they were as “lucky” as you are.

But life as the child of a famous racecar driver was difficult for me. Dad’s streak of success started when I was only eight years old. I was hurting because of what had happened in our family. I missed my mom and endured conflict with my stepmother, and like all children, I wanted a real relationship with my dad. Unfortunately, that type of relationship simply wasn’t available.

I wanted Dad’s attention, not a photo from Victory Lane. I longed for him to sit down to dinner with us, to pick me up from school, to come to my programs and sports events, to be part of my life. I just wanted him to do what parents do. After all, my mom lived six hours away from us and she still found ways to show up and support us when we needed it. Teresa was present in our lives, but she didn’t relate to us in a motherly fashion.

Dad’s success came with prize money, but it also came with a price. It cost me the father-daughter relationship I hungered for. While I’m proud of my dad’s accomplishments on the racetrack, they resulted in great personal pain for me.

During those years, I looked forward to visits with my mom more than anything. She made everything so special! She always asked Dale and me what we wanted for Christmas and gave it to us. But our happy holidays with her were special to us not because of the presents but because we knew she wanted to spend time with us.

On the other hand, we dreaded Christmas with Dad and Teresa. Dad was consumed with racing, and Teresa never seemed interested in us at all. Dale and I laugh now about how we got “memorabilia”

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at our Christmases with them. Our gifts consisted of airport souvenirs from their travel destinations and even free items from hotels. But our disappointment over holidays with them was not about the gifts; it was because they had no idea who we were and what we liked. When we were with them, we didn't feel known or supported. We didn't feel that we mattered in any meaningful way. I believe this is related to my dad's fundamental belief that a father's job is to meet his family's *material* needs—to make the house payment, pay for the groceries, keep us clothed, and make sure we went to school.

My dad tried to do something really great for me when I was sixteen: he gave me a silver 1987 Chevrolet Monte Carlo SS Fastback. It wasn't brand new, but it was a very nice used car. While I realize many people would have given *anything* for that car, *nothing* about it was cool for a teenage girl. When he gave it to me, I didn't care how many guys would drool over it; I just felt—once again—that he didn't truly know me.

He had no idea how much I needed and wanted him to be part of my world. I would have given up the SS Fastback in a split second—and all the other material goods he provided—just to have some quality time with him, just to hear him say he loved me and felt I was important, or to have him demonstrate genuine interest in me. I was surrounded by teenagers who only dreamed of having such a car, and because of my dad's background and the world in which he lived, he thought it was a really nice gift. Of course I was glad to have my own transportation, but the gift fell flat for me because it did nothing to fill the void in my heart. The absence of a father's love and interest in me affected me deeply, and I spent the next twenty-five years of my life trying to fill that hole.

No matter how fabulous other people thought my life was, the

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truth is that being the child of a celebrity was not always wonderful. Looking back now, if someone were to ask me about the best thing that happened in my growing-up years, I would say it was the opportunity to be a big sister. Dale was my first best friend and the first person, along with my mom, on the team of my life. We've been through a lot together, and to this day, the two of us have a unique brother-sister relationship.

BIG SISTER

From the day Dale was born, I've taken seriously my role as his big sister. Our mom told me I loved having a baby brother and wanted to treat Dale like my own little baby from the very start. According to her, I was always eager to help with him and felt a sense of responsibility for him at quite a young age. That became even more true when Mom moved to Virginia, and Dad and Teresa were busy with his racing.

In a YouTube interview about this time in our lives, Dale says:

Kelley really became my caretaker and caregiver. She made sure I wasn't dressed like a fool for school, and she made sure I had money in my pocket for lunch. She made sure I'd done my homework and wasn't going to get in trouble. . . . We had daily chores, and she made sure they were done and I was doing what I was supposed to be doing to keep me out of trouble. She coddled me and really took care of me. Dad wasn't taking care of me. I mean, he was racing and gone, and Teresa was with him. But Kelley was

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there. Kelley is *the* one who was there with me every day. We had housekeepers, and we had two, three, four different nannies that were around. But I never created a relationship with them. My sister was the one I went to every day, for everything.¹

According to our mom, when Dale and I were young, I was the one who needed to be entertained, enjoyed having other people around, and didn't like being alone. I wanted to be busy all the time. Dale, on the other hand, was content to spend time playing with his toys and could easily entertain himself. He didn't need company and was more self-sufficient than I was.

Another difference between Dale and me—one that would become significant through our teenage years—is that I was a rule follower and he was not. Dad liked to live by rules, so he and I got along well in that regard. If he said we had to get all As on our report cards at school, I got all As. I did so because he expected me to do it.

I didn't seek accolades or applause for good grades, partly because I was content to meet Dad's expectations but mostly because I didn't like the consequences of failing to meet them. Getting in trouble because of a low grade only amplified what I already felt was missing between Dad and me, so I worked hard to avoid it. I never understood why grades were important to my dad, because he wasn't given to explaining anything. We never had conversations about why making good grades was a good idea, nor did he give me any reason or encouragement to excel in school. He simply said, "Make As." So I made As without understanding why it mattered. All I knew was that it would keep me from getting in trouble—and being in trouble caused me to feel unloved.

My dad never asked me what subjects I liked in school or why I

liked them. He didn't know which classes were difficult for me, and he didn't offer to arrange for someone to help me with them. He had no idea who my favorite teachers were, who my friends were, or what caused me to struggle. He wasn't one to hand out prizes or praise when I did well; he simply viewed it as me doing what I was supposed to do.

People might assume that Dale and I started racing when we were very young because we were born into a family so strongly identified with NASCAR. We did not. In fact, our dad didn't encourage us to become involved in the sport at all. He certainly didn't push Dale to become a driver. While some fathers are eager for their sons to grow up and follow in their footsteps, and my dad had become a racecar driver like his father, he didn't discuss racing with Dale when Dale was young. My brother learned about NASCAR the same way I did—by watching and listening to our dad and by being surrounded by people involved in the sport.

Dale's unusual level of exposure to NASCAR definitely gave him a desire to race, but because Dad and Teresa were both consumed with the sport, no one ever took time to identify Dale's true interests and help him pursue them.

Even though I was surrounded by cars, drivers, and pit crews more than many girls my age were, I spent most afternoons playing Barbie dolls with my neighbor. At the same time, I was also a tomboy. I loved adventure and adrenaline, and I would try almost anything. At a young age, I mastered go-karts and minibikes, always looking for a thrill. My hunger for a rush is genetic; I inherited it from my dad, and it's still a part of who I am today.

Dale, however, is not wired like I am. He loves a good adrenaline rush now, but I didn't see that side of him when we were young. He

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craved attention, but he didn't seek it through following rules or making good grades. While I strove to please Dad in order to *avoid* negative attention, Dale wanted Dad to take notice of him—at any cost. Unlike me, he was willing to suffer the consequences of letting Dad down, so he found ways to be noticed for all the wrong reasons. He got plenty of attention; it was just bad attention.

I realized that getting into trouble was a two-edged sword for Dale. In one way, it allowed him to gain the attention he longed for, but in other ways it was painful for him. Maybe that's why I spent so much time as a child and teenager getting him out of trouble, trying to make him feel better, looking out for him, feeling sorry for him, and helping him. For example, after meals he and I were supposed to clean our dishes, but he never did. I can't count the times I cleaned his dishes for him simply to keep him out of trouble.

At one point, the situation became so bad that Dale couldn't seem to stay out of trouble. In an effort to help him, Dad sent both of us to a Christian school. The school expelled Dale after one semester, so in 1986 Dad sent him to military school.

It's important to understand what was taking place in our family during this time. Two years earlier, Dad had started Dale Earnhardt Incorporated (DEI). NASCAR fans know that while DEI was an ownership group, my dad didn't race for them. I don't think that kind of arrangement happens in other professional sports, but it is allowable in NASCAR. Instead, he raced almost his entire career for Richard Childress Racing.

My dad and Richard Childress were extremely close friends—best friends, I would say—and hunting buddies. They were not only colleagues on the racetrack; they also traveled and spent their free time together. Richard Childress Racing's website declares, "The

Childress-Earnhardt duo was lightning in a bottle.”² My dad was the team’s only driver for twenty-five years. People have wondered why my dad continued to drive for Richard Childress even after he became an owner. Part of the answer is that he was loyal and he appreciated the opportunities and support Richard Childress had given him. All Dad ever really wanted was to own cars and to compete. His need to compete was met at Richard Childress Racing, and his desire to own cars was met through DEI.

As Dad became a sports celebrity and began earning more than enough money to live on, starting DEI made sense for him and Teresa. The company was a first-of-its-kind, personality-based business conglomerate to house all things Dale Earnhardt. He had become a sports powerhouse, and DEI was the headquarters for his personal brand as well as an entity through which he could own racecars and have his own drivers. It was not uncommon for one of his cars to race against one of Richard Childress’s cars. In many ways, NASCAR is just one big family, and sometimes siblings and cousins fight!

I don’t know whether the intensifying of Dale’s bad behavior was related to the early years of DEI, which required so much of our dad’s time and energy. I do know that I considered Dale’s being sent to military school a very serious matter, and I was genuinely worried about him there. He was short and scrawny, with legs that never tanned, and I was concerned that the other students would tease him. I knew for certain that if he ever got in a fight with one of the big boys, he wouldn’t win.

After three weeks of constantly worrying about Dale at military school, I decided I needed to be closer. So I asked Dad if I could go to military school too. I spent the second half of my ninth-grade

year and all of my tenth-grade year there, looking after Dale. He still can't believe I wanted to go. He has often said, "Military school is like punishment. What kind of ninth grader says, 'I miss my brother. I'm going to go to military school?'"

I did.

I am not sure what compelled me to be so protective of Dale that I followed him to military school. Perhaps it was because he always chose negative ways to seek attention, and I was afraid of how bad that could become. I remember wondering at one point, *How much more trouble can you stand to get into?*

After a year and a half at military school, Dale and I both returned home to finish high school at our local public school. We fought often with Teresa and continued to take refuge in each other. Dale tried to stay out of trouble, and we both did the best we could.

I finished high school in 1990 and fulfilled one of my dad's dreams for his children—for us to go to college. Eager to move out of Dad and Teresa's house, I narrowed my college choices to three, based on discussions with our school guidance counselor and on where my friends wanted to go: Western Carolina University, Appalachian State University, and the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Two of those schools were in the mountains, and one was near the beach. I chose the beach and enrolled at UNC Wilmington.

Since I had followed Dale to military school, he and I had both matured. He entered eleventh grade when I started my freshman year of college. Letting him go away by himself as a seventh grader when I knew other students would pick on him was one thing, but leaving him at home as a junior in high school was different. He had a driver's license by that time, so he was more independent and

stable than he had ever been. I knew he would be okay, and I was eager to move away from home. For once in my life, I didn't feel bad about leaving my brother!

One of my favorite memories with my dad took place around the time of my high school graduation, not long before I left for college. The two of us went to his farm together, and on the way, we stopped at an auto parts store to buy a gas cap for a car that had been sitting in his farm shop for several weeks. To me, that white two-door Chevrolet Z24 was a genuinely cool car, unlike the SS Fastback. I would have loved to have it, but Dad was keeping it for a friend who needed to hide it before surprising his child with it.

When we arrived at the farm shop, we went to take a look at the Z24. He tossed me a gas cap, saying, "Go put this on your new car."

What? I thought. *What's he talking about?*

The car already had a gas cap. The new one was simply Dad's way of telling me the car was mine.

I never imagined that Z24 would be my graduation gift from Dad. He had never asked me what kind of car I wanted or what my dream car would be, but I was excited.

That was my high school graduation celebration. There was no special meal, no party, and no fanfare—just Dad and me in the shop with the car. It was better than any other celebration could have been.

When I left for college, I packed the Z24 and headed to Wilmington. Mom met me there to help me outfit my dorm room. I had chosen a few items before I left home but was not able to buy much, so I was thankful that Mom took me shopping for a few more essentials. Not long after I arrived, I secured a job in a retail store in the local mall in order to make spending money.

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I had no idea what the future would hold. Some of what lay before me I could have never predicted, and I would change it if I could. No doubt being Dale Earnhardt's daughter has afforded me some unique *professional* advantages and opportunities, for which I will always be grateful. But my starting position didn't set me up for *personal* success. What I've learned though through the years is that you don't need to start on the pole. With enough determination and the right help, you can come from behind to win.