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Race drivers discard time others want

By SUSAN AGER

Free Press Columnist

A note from Susan: I got hundreds of phone calls and about 4,000 e-mails on this one, most from angry NASCAR fans. What I couldn't tell readers, what I had promised not to tell, was that on the same day Earnhardt died, my 68-year-old mother learned she had a rare and deadly cancer that killed her within a year.

Dale Earnhardt busts his head by blasting into a wall at 180 miles per hour and the racing world dares to claim it is stunned.

On the radio I actually heard another NASCAR driver say that Earnhardt's instant death at the Daytona 500 proves that "life is fragile." I didn't catch the guy's name -- maybe it was even the racer who won -- because I was shouting at his audacity.

He's damn right life is fragile. A stray germ can destroy it. A cupful of water. A fish bone. A deranged cell. An interlude with a stranger.

Because life is fragile, we wash our hands. We take our antibiotics. We learn to swim or wear a life vest. We wear condoms and we wear our seatbelts and when we push the pedal too hard, we get scared. Our fear slows us down. It slows most of us down.

Racing deaths

Four centuries ago, a French mathematician and theologian named Blaise Pascal defined human dignity not as power but thought.

"Man," he wrote, "is only a reed, the weakest thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed."

So what are men like Earnhardt thinking?

Sixteen others have killed themselves driving fast cars in the past 10 years in big races alone. One who died last year was 19 years old, Adam Petty, the grandson of revered racer Richard Petty, who says the kid's death was "meant to be."

The younger Petty drove without a head restraint.

So did Earnhardt, 30 years older.

While millions of spectators cheer, these men flirt with disaster, dangling their lives in death's reach for no reason but what looks to me like thrills and fame and money.

Meanwhile, in homes across America, human beings scabble to stay alive, tending to their wounds, taking their meds by the hour and praying in between.

They are eager to stretch life, like a small pension, while a man like Earnhardt tosses his minutes to the wind.

Chasing life

I am surrounded right now by people hugging time tight. My uncle counts 70 sutures from his ankle to his groin. My friend Barbara ties kerchiefs to her bald head. My friend Mike holds his breath about his 60th birthday in April.

The arteries that keep his heart pumping have been cut and pasted in four places.

At the gym, middle-aged people chilled by close calls grunt and sweat every day, to live better longer. At the supermarket, parents read nutrition labels to forestall obesity in their children, to keep them safe from diseases that could kill them young.

In comparison, drivers like Earnhardt, with his pedal to the metal, look like ingrates. So does everyone else who speeds, on drugs or wheels or arrogance, running out the whole spool of their ribbon before our eyes. Who is surprised to see the end unfurl so soon?

It's tough to watch someone risk so boldly the very life you hoard.

And yet, I know that we who take our vitamins daily might wish, at the end, that we took more risks, too, kicking up dust and whooping. Earnhardt's pals might say it's spuds like us who toss away our minutes, satisfied with thrills like these: a fresh bag of Chee-tos, a tight race on TV and a warm place to sit and watch it.

At least their guy died hot. Nestled in his pocket was every gold coin of success a 21st-Century American guy could want, plus a son who aims to imitate him. Live fast, die young. It's a thrilling choice. It attracts attention, and even envy.

Most of us, though, are happy to live safe and die old, with no flowers from strangers.