



NATIONAL TREASURES

Fighting for the spotlight was not on the agenda when two of America's favorite racers got together



by Dale Earnhardt Jr.

■ NASCAR HERO, DAYTONA 500 WINNER, 2004, 2014

DAN CONNECTION

National Guard sponsor colleague

I met Dan when we shared the National Guard sponsorship in 2009 and 2010. I'd seen him a couple of times at Guard functions and appearances. We got to know each other through that relationship, and later we got together at Indianapolis Motor Speedway. I remember how nice he was to me that day. Indy was his home turf. NASCAR guys are often considered visitors at Indy, but he was really nice and welcoming.

Every year we did a dinner together in Washington, D.C., for the National Guard Youth Foundation. We all had to get up on stage and speak, so I was able to see more of the person Dan was through that interaction and by listening to him talk. It was through those speeches and meetings that I realized what a likeable guy he was.

I had just a handful of opportunities to be around him. You

assume that other drivers – whether they are in NASCAR, IndyCar or Formula 1 – are very confident. A lot of times when your confidence and their confidence are in the same range, it might create a little bit too much ego for one place. But with Dan, it was never like that.

What I appreciated most about him was that he was really approachable. Having a conversation with him was really easy. At the appearance at Indy, they had an Indy car there. I could've felt like a second fiddle, but Dan made me feel completely comfortable. The promotion was centered a little more around his team's relationship with the National Guard than mine, but Dan made a point of making me feel like I was a part of the process.

He was the focal point that day, but he made me feel at home because of his interaction with me in front of everyone. He included me in the conversation throughout the day and kept me updated about what we were doing. He didn't have to do that. Honestly, I look back at that day and don't know if I would've been able to do what Dan did.

He made sure that everyone in the room was having a good time. He had a great disposition, very upbeat and positive, and it rubbed off on everyone around him. I really appreciated how



“What I appreciated most about him was that he was really approachable. Having a conversation with him was really easy”

personable he was. The truth is, he could've felt some competition from me being around. After all, we were both competing for the same sponsorship money and attention from the Guard.

A lot of times in those situations – when teams from different forms of racing have the same sponsor – the drivers try to one-up each other to get more of a piece of the pie. Dan never made it a competition. He always made it feel like we were on the same team, just two guys who had the same goal. He made me feel like his teammate, and I really, truly appreciated that. ■

