

The Darlington Stripe: Damage That Is Well Earned and Well Respected

How often will a driver say they enjoy getting into the wall? It's not exactly a phrase that rolls off the tongue. More often, a driver will end up apologizing for getting into the wall, or curse the other competitor that forced him/her up there. It's not the best feeling as a racer knowing your car is torn up. However, in some instances, getting into the wall is not a big deal. In a few cases, it's a badge of honor. When it comes to Darlington Raceway, getting into the wall means you earned your stripe, your Darlington Stripe .

At most race tracks, the fastest line is right around the apron, against the white line. At Darlington, it is the exact opposite. Every qualifying lap, practice run and lap run in the race is quickest against the outside wall. There's a risk and a reward if one does it right. The reward is simple, a fast lap that could put a driver at the front of the field. The risk, getting the paint on the right door panel torn up.

Darlington Raceway is over 60 years old, but drivers didn't always race in that lane. Originally, the track was what is now considered the apron, with the higher-banked corners as the run-off. Eventually, drivers found the higher line was better, and thus racing at Darlington became what we know today. It can be considered a crime if drivers don't come away from Darlington without having the paint scraped off the right side. In last year's Southern 500, both Kyle Busch and Dale Earnhardt Jr. got into the wall hard enough that the numbers were half worn off.

In honor of the return of the Southern 500 name, track officials painted the walls the old-school red and white. By the end of the night, the officials could add black to that color scheme. All four corners had the name worn off, and each car had some evidence of being up into the barrier.

It's what makes Darlington...Darlington. The "egg-shaped oval" has always been the most unique track in NASCAR. From the moment it was built, the speedway has become one of the hallowed grounds for NASCAR history. The paint from drivers named Petty, Elliott, Earnhardt, Wallace, Gordon, and others have been scraped along those walls. It's been painted over, but hasn't worn away.

Each year, new stripes are added to the Darlington walls, each with a unique story. Sometimes it's because a driver got too high, other times it's due to the reaction of a competitor. Other times the car will get loose, and the only way to save it is getting into the wall. No matter how the Darlington Stripe is earned, it's the only time a driver doesn't mind seeing damage to their car.

On Saturday, the walls of the Darlington Raceway will begin the night perfectly clean and pristine. However, by the end of the night, they will be torn up, black, and beaten. Cars will have red and white paint covering the right side of the sheet metal.

But, above all else, those stripes will be well earned by NASCAR's best.