

ALUMNI

GWU Alumnus Gets Boost in his Career from NASCAR Hall-of-Famer Dale Earnhardt Jr.

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Photo from @MrF4Speed

Broadcasting and Sim Racing Gives Blake McCandless, '17 and '20, Chance to Race for Real

“Every role no matter how small is important to the common goal”—this is the mantra that Blake McCandless lives by. While building his talents as a broadcaster, the two-time alumnus of Gardner-Webb University has taken every opportunity to learn. He strives to be a team player, develop connections and serve others.

His persistence and talent even gained the attention of NASCAR hall-of-famer Dale Earnhardt Jr. Twice, Earnhardt has mentioned McCandless as someone who has a future in motorsports broadcasting.



Earnhardt's most recent endorsement came as McCandless found himself in a place he never imagined—behind the wheel of a race car—driving, for the first time, in two races at Hickory Motor Speedway. The grandson of legendary drag racer Herb “Mr. 4-Speed” McCandless, he's only ever driven cars on iRacing, a computer-simulated racing game that organizes, hosts and officiates online racing on virtual tracks all around the world, including a training model for Hickory Motor Speedway. Because iRacing offers a variety of officially licensed vehicles to choose from and provides laser-scanned replicas of the world's greatest racing circuits, McCandless said it flattens the learning curve as a driver gets behind the wheel of a real race car.

Finishing sixth in the second race, McCandless proudly sported the new GW Runnin' Bulldog on the hood of a car owned by Landon Huffman. “It was awesome to showcase Gardner-Webb, and the whole rebrand,” McCandless related. “I think the new logos and the whole revamped energy around the school is really great. It was cool to have the Bulldog on board and at least it got a pretty good show. We may not have been up front, but a lot of people were watching.”

McCandless graduated in 2017 with a degree in sport management and in 2020 with a Master of Business Administration. He was manager for the men's basketball team and became interested in broadcasting. He started showing up to events, offering to do whatever job was needed. “I wanted to show people that I can show up, and I can work hard,” McCandless asserted. “No matter what role I was filling, whether I was running a camera or doing replays or anything like that, I was trying to be around, hands-on and doing anything that's necessary. If you show up and work hard, people notice and are more willing to let you try things.”



▲ The GW Runnin' Bulldog is ready to race. (Photo from @MrF4Speed)

His latest opportunities in the broadcast booth came through his iRacing hobby. In 2016, he and a friend started providing commentary for online racing groups. It was fun way to earn some money while he was in college.

The pastime led to more recognition in simulated racing circles. McCandless started broadcasting races on the iRacing competitive ladder in 2020, covering the eNASCAR iRacing Road to Pro Series campaign.

When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down live NASCAR events, the networks turned to iRacing to fill their time slots. Program directors needed people familiar with simulated racing to coach their announcers on the difference. McCandless was tapped to help prepare the TV announcers.

As iRacing broadcasting opportunities slowed down, McCandless received the ultimate, and totally unexpected, boost in his career: an endorsement from Earnhardt, who competes in a few iRacing events and had heard McCandless announce races. In June 2021, Earnhardt commented on his weekly podcast that somebody ought to take a look at McCandless as a broadcaster or pit reporter.

“All of a sudden when somebody like him says something like that it carries a lot of weight and a lot more attention is paid, too,” McCandless reflected. “I reached out to him and told him that I didn’t know what to do to make it happen, but I would do anything, shadow somebody, to see if I could make it work.”

Earnhardt arranged for him to shadow two guys who work for NBC, and after that, people started calling him. “I was able to secure a pit reporting position with Pit Row TV; utility work with NASCAR on NBC; and the job announcing at Ace Speedway (Elon, N.C.),” McCandless recounted.



▲ iRacers will find a simulated version of the Runnin' Bulldog car in the [platform](https://www.tradingpaints.com/showroom/view/524162/Blake-McCandless-71-Huffman-RacingJason-Smith-Racing-Limited-Late-Model) (<https://www.tradingpaints.com/showroom/view/524162/Blake-McCandless-71-Huffman-RacingJason-Smith-Racing-Limited-Late-Model>). (Photo from @MrF4Speed)

A year later on June 7, 2022, Earnhardt mentioned McCandless again in a tweet saying, “This guy is a talent and has a future in motorsports broadcasting.” The post featured a photo of McCandless wearing a Gardner-Webb basketball shirt. In the Twitter thread, McCandless made a comment wondering what the new Runnin' Bulldog logo would look like on his car. Less than a week later, he was at Hickory Motor Speedway with the GW Bulldog along for the ride.

McCandless was grateful for the experience and said it would help him to be a better track announcer. “Racing was awesome, there’s no adrenaline rush or feeling like being behind the wheel of a race car,” he said. “I got to see how much of a thrill it can be. I also think that it’s a long and grueling sport. It was great to have the opportunity to sit behind the wheel. Hopefully, I will be able to do it a couple more

times. Maybe throughout the year. The broadcast booth—it's nice and air-conditioned in there—is where I'm most comfortable. I get as much enjoyment watching it and being able to share that experience with people as much as being a part of it, too."

About iRacing

iRacing (<https://www.iracing.com/>) puts you in the driver's seat by allowing members of the online program to experience today's newest form of competitive motorsport: virtual racing. iRacing is a fun, inexpensive and highly-competitive way for race fans and gamers to experience head-to-head racing challenges usually reserved for professional racers. The best sim racers in the world compete on iRacing and fans can watch the race broadcasts live on the iRacing eSports Network.

About Gardner-Webb

Gardner-Webb University (<https://gardner-webb.edu/>) is North Carolina's recognized leader in private, Christian higher education. A Carnegie-Classified Doctoral/Professional University, GWU is home to six professional schools, 14 academic departments, more than 80 undergraduate and graduate majors, and a world-class faculty. Located on a beautiful 225-acre campus in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb prepares graduates to impact their chosen professions, equips them with the skills to advance the frontiers of knowledge, and inspires them to make a positive and lasting difference in the lives of others. Ignite your future at [Gardner-Webb.edu](https://gardner-webb.edu/).

Blake McCandless on YouTube

Find out more about Blake McCandless' racing debut on YouTube:

Episode of Driven (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4DUn-CUd9M>).

Landon Huffman Racing (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Byvlfvjtfqs>).

Watch Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s Podcast (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COCS3ZFWdLY>) that mentions McCandless at 16:20.