

## Force, Brown, Enders-Stevens and Smith race to victories at Midwest Nationals

John Force raced to his 136th career victory and moved into position to earn a 16th Funny Car world championship title at the AAA Insurance NHRA Midwest Nationals at Gateway Motorsports Park near St. Louis.

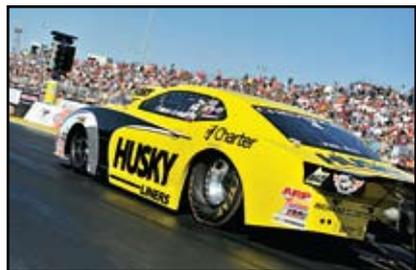
Antron Brown (Top Fuel), Erica Enders-Stevens (Pro Stock) and Matt Smith (Pro Stock Motorcycle) also were winners at the 21st race of the season and third of six playoff events in the NHRA Mello Yello Countdown to the Championship.

Force powered to his second win of the season with a final round performance of 4.097 seconds at 310.13 mph in his Castrol GTX Ford Mustang, while defending world champ Jack Beckman trailed in his Valvoline/MTS Dodge Charger with a 4.127 at 309.84.

With the victory, Force, 64, now trails series leader Matt Hagan by six points.

Force defeated rookie Chad Head, long-time rival Ron Capps and teammate Robert Hight along the way to his third win at Gateway. Hagan, the event's top qualifier who entered the day with a 63-point lead over second place Cruz Pedregon, lost to Beckman in the second round. Pedregon also went out early with a first round exit, which opened the door for Force to move to the top of the points order.

"We've got a [points] race now, and I'm excited," Force said. "I had a good day. The most important thing for me was to see the crowd. They filled the bleachers. To win a championship you've gotta live it every day, and I'm not chasing a champion-



**Erica Enders-Stevens raced to her second consecutive victory and scored her 6th career win.**

ship. I've been chasing Corporate America and taking care of our sponsors. My wife [Laurie] set me straight this morning, 'she said, what you need to do is win. We need John Force to get back to winning races.' Hey, I can do that. I ain't going to say I will win another race or a championship, but I'll be in the fight with these kids."

The runner-up finish put the still-winless Beckman in third place in the standings, 44 back of Hagan. Robert Hight is fourth overall, 48 points back in his Auto Club Mustang. Two-time champ Pedregon dropped to fifth, 83 behind Hagan.

In Top Fuel, Brown claimed his third victory of the season and 40th of his career by defeating Khalid alBalooshi in the final round. Brown covered the distance in 3.788 at 323.97 in his Toyota/Matco Tools dragster to take his second consecutive win at this track, and third overall. Runner-up alBalooshi finished in 3.833 at 319.98 in his Al-Anabi Racing dragster.

Brown defeated Billy Torrence, Clay Millican and seven-time champ Tony Schumacher to advance to the final round. The effort ended a mini-slump for the defending world champion, who has not been in a final round since he won in Atlanta in early May. Since then he's posted eight first round losses and a DNQ at the Countdown playoff opener in Charlotte.

"It's no secret we've been struggling a lot more than what we had hoped to, and we had hoped we could have had a turnaround a little sooner, but we're not going to go out without a fight," Brown said. "The class is at an all-time high where everybody is running strong, but we just want to get back in the groove because it's not going to be over until it's over."

Brown moved to sixth in the standings with the victory and now trails series leader Shawn Langdon by 102 points. Doug Kalitta and Spencer Massey, who both lost in the first round, are second and third, 33 and 35 points back respectively. Morgan Lucas is fourth overall, 45 points back and Schumacher is fifth.

In Pro Stock, Enders-Stevens raced to her second consecutive victory at this event



**64 year old John Force celebrates like a young whippersnapper.**

and scored the sixth win of her career by holding off Mike Edwards in the final round. Enders-Stevens used a reaction time advantage to claim her second win of the season, powering her Husky Liners Chevy Camaro to a run of 6.540 at 211.23 to finish in front of the quicker, but losing Interstate Batteries/I Am Second Camaro of Edwards, which posted a 6.532 at 212.36.

"This was a great day," said Enders-Stevens, who beat Deric Kramer, Shane Gray and Rickie Jones to advance to the final round. "We had a consistent car in qualifying and a consistent car today. My guys showed their stuff, and we were able to get down the track when some other guys didn't. I love St. Louis."

Enders-Stevens, who missed six of the last eight races in the regular season due to lack of sponsorship, moves into fourth place in the points order with the victory, 60 back of Edwards, who regained the series lead. Jeg Coughlin is second overall, and Jason Line is third.

In Pro Stock Motorcycle, Smith rode to his second victory of the season and moved into the series lead by outrunning LE Tonglet in the final round. Smith scored his 15th win of his career and second at this track with a performance of 6.887 at 194.52 on his Viper Motorcycle Company

Buell, while Tonglet trailed with a 6.950 at 192.14 on his Nitro Fish Suzuki.

Smith, who finally grabbed another Wally after posting three consecutive runner-up finishes in his last three final round appearances, defeated 71-year-old Joe DeSantis, defending world champ Eddie Krawiec and Countdown rival Michael Ray on his way to the final.

"This was important because I've messed up so much here lately in final rounds," Smith said. "I've had the best bike and gave it up. It has been one thing after another. I could have won five or six races this year. This time, I tried not to mess up. When we got to the final, I knew we had a better bike, and I took the win and the points lead. Now we just need to see what happens the rest of the year."

Smith now holds a 75-point lead over both Lucas Oil Buell riders Hector Arana Sr. and Hector Arana Jr., who are tied for second place. Smith says he is lucky to be in this position, considering he nearly didn't get to race today after falling ill last night.

"I got sick with food poisoning, and I had an IV in me," Smith said. "I have to say thanks to the doctors here or I wouldn't be here today. I was hurting pretty bad. My blood pressure was really low, and they told me that if it didn't improve, I wasn't going to race today. I drank water all night, and at 9 a.m., they checked me again, and I felt a lot better. I was lucky I even got to race, and now I made it to the winner's circle."

*Photos courtesy of NHRA*



**Antron Brown defeated Torrance, Millican and Schumacher in Top Fuel.**

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