

# Thunder Valley Nationals in Bristol

Hi, I'm Doug Lewis with Ford Performance Specialists in Mableton, GA, and I'm a

Nitro Junkie. (Everyone around the circle says, Hi, Doug). All I can say is... What a Race. It was a race, within a race, that also had another race inside.

The New England Nationals in Epping, NH were rained out and re-run within the Thunder Valley Nationals in Bristol, TN. The NHRA tried valiantly to get the race in on Sunday and then again on Monday, but Mother Nature made other plans. NHRA decided to run eliminations during the qualifying runs of the Thunder Valley Nationals. This decision was great for Thunder Valley fans who got an extra round of qualifying runs and a full race day on Saturday as well as Sunday. Since the ladder at Epping was set, NHRA ran Round 1 of Eliminations on Friday Night. This made things pretty exciting. It was a cool Friday night under the lights and the Nitro teams were chompin' at the bit to get after it. All the teams got a hit at the track in Q1, then those in the Epping ladder set up for First Round of Eliminations. Those not in the Epping ladder ran first and got an extra qualifying lap. Nighttime Nitro racing is always exciting for the fans and the racers. It's awesome to see 14' header flames over the roof and hear the sounds that Thunder Valley is known for as the track is nestled between 2 mountains.

In the midst of racing Epping's Eliminations, there was the Mission Foods 2Fast2-Tasty Challenge on Saturday. This is a race within the race (where there's another race to run too). This specialty race is for the semi-finalists of the last race run each other again for prize money AND championship points to

be factored in at the end of the year. Mission Foods is a great partner with NHRA and gives back so much to our racing community.

All the teams were set on Mean as the track temps plummeted. There was gonna be LOTS of grip, so you've gotta bring the power to keep the car stuck. Lots of traction with not enough power gives you a weak shake. This is where the wheel winds up the tire at the hit. On a track with exceptional grip, it takes power to hold the tire wound up on the rim. If you don't put enough power down, the tire uncontrollably unwinds and leads to tire shake. The tire whips back into its normal round shape and doesn't stay glued to the track. Too much power at the hit and you'll rip the tire from the track. It's always a very fine line or Tuning Window between not putting enough power in and putting in too much. Some teams met the challenge and some did not. There were a few engine explosions and some oil-downs that slowed the progression, but as the night went on, the temps kept coming down and the cars were able to go faster and faster. There's a difference between qualifying and eliminations with respect to setup and execution. For qualifying, a driver should stage the car super shallow to get the best elapsed time (ET). The longer you make the track the more time you have to accelerate before the clocks start. Deep staging is where you roll the car deeper into the light beams and use some of the extra real estate within the staging beams which helps reaction time numbers, but hurts ET on the other end. Reaction Time helps win races. If you leave on time with a good reaction, chances are you'll get to the finish line quick-



er than your opponent in the other lane. It was difficult for drivers to switch from Qualifying Mode to Race Mode on a Friday night. There were a couple of mis-steps in this process that caught some drivers by surprise. The Safety Safari did a great job of prepping the track and NHRA did a great job to make the competition play out on a level field.

Only 13 Top Fuel cars showed up in Bristol from Epping. The teams not in the Epping ladder ran first on Friday night, then the pairings from the Epping ladder ran Round 1 Eliminations. Only a few teams weren't able to make it to Bristol, so Antron Brown ended up with a bye run. Good thing too, 'cause they struck the tires at the hit. They were trying rotate the Earth and just brought too much power. The one that came to play was Justin Ashley and the Phillips Connect Toyota team. They laid down a very impressive 3.755 to Dan Mercier's 3.76. The quickest in Round 1 was Leah Pruitt with a killer 3.745. The other winners were Steve Torrance with a 3.753 over Austin Prock and Tony Shoemaker with a 3.797 over Shawn Langdon.

On Saturday, the Epping race continued. Round 2 pitted Steve Torrance and Antron Brown. Antron lost traction mid-track and Steve motored to a 3.897. This time Brittany smokes the tires just before Justin Ashley who wins with a 4.097. Tony Shoemaker gets the by run and sends it down to a tire smoking, lack luster 4.487. The other pair was Mike Salinas winning a very close race with Leah Pruitt. The Semi-Finals found Mike Salinas winning with a 3.848 over Tony Shoemaker and Justin Ashley winning with

a 3.892 over Steve Torrance to set up a great Final round. Justin and Mike lined up for the Finals where everyone else had a last ditch qualifying session. At the end, Justin Ashley wins on a holeshot where the 3.846 of Justin beats the quicker 3.835 by leaving 2/10ths quicker than Tony.

In the middle of the Epping Eliminations was the Mission Foods 2Fast2Tasty Challenge where the semi-finalists from the race before race each other for a cash prize AND championship points. Again, Mike Ashley came to play. He mowed thru the others in the field to get the Mission 2Fast2Tasty NHRA Challenge trophy and the cash. Most of the racers really like the Championship points collected at the end of the year.

On Sunday, the Bristol Thunder Valley Nationals kicked off First Round, Tony Shoemaker wins over Dan Mercier, Doug Kalitta wins over Clay Millican, Antron Brown wins over Brittany Force, Spencer Massey wins over Leah Pruitt, Steve Torrance wins over Shawn Langdon, Austin Prock wins over Camron Ferre, Mike Salinas wins over Josh Hart and Justin Ashley wins over Doug Foley. Justin mows thru the field to meet Antron Brown in the finals. Both on a collision course with each other. At the hit both cars leave dead even, but Antron lights the tires at about 500' and Justin wins the event and Triples Up to win 3 races in the same weekend. Great job, Justin, NHRA, Camping World and the Fans. See you all at Norwalk in a couple of weeks.

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