

## How Antron Brown became one of NHRA's biggest and brightest stars

Antron Brown stands today as one of NHRA Drag Racing's biggest and brightest stars. The three-time Top Fuel world champion exudes energy, charisma, excitement, and a positive vibe that makes it hard to not smile or be uplifted in his presence.



But 20 years ago, Brown stood at the crossroads of a drag racing career. If he turned left, maybe he could go back to school and build on the business degree he'd already earned; he always dreamed of owning his own company. If he turned right, maybe he could parlay the athletic prowess that had made him a three-sport star in high school into living in the sports world and still enjoy bracket racing his motorcycle to satisfy his need for speed.

Or he could continue down the path he'd started two years earlier when he'd accepted the chance to ride a Pro Stock Motorcycle for his cousin's husband, NFL cornerback Troy Vincent. The problem that faced Brown in 2000, however, was that even though he and Vincent had enjoyed success with three national event wins and a third-place finish in 1999, Vincent was pulling out of funding the Team 23 Suzuki.

Looking back 20 years ago, there are many things that Brown didn't have then that he does now. A wife. Kids. Um, a place to live.

One thing he did have was the desire to see what his drag racing future held.

Vincent had already changed Brown's life once, calling him practically from out of the blue in late 1997 while Brown was still attending New Jersey's Mercer

Junior College, pursuing his Associate of Arts degree in business administration.

Drag racing and motorcycles certainly were nothing new to Brown, who grew up attending races in New Jersey with his father, Albert, and uncle, Andre, who bracket raced at Garden State strips after

the need for speed was passed down to them by their father.

Brown had been riding motorcycles almost his whole life, learning to ride one not long after mastering the training wheels of a pedal bicycle, and by age 12, he was competing in motocross events.

A gifted athlete, Brown also starred in football, basketball, and track and field at Northern Burlington County Regional High School in Columbus, N.J., and went drag racing for the first time during his senior year, riding a nine-second, 160-mph Suzuki GSXR 1100.

Speed came easy to him, on wheels or feet. In college, he honed his track and field skills and ran quick enough in the 100-meter dash to receive an invitation to the 1998 U.S. Olympic Trials and was even offered an athletic scholarship by LIU, but he chose drag racing.

Brown and crew chief Mark Peiser struck out on their own in 2000 in a shop they rented from Meredith Schultz after her husband, Pro Stock Motorcycle hall of fame rider Dave Schultz, had passed away from cancer.

They put together a couple of sponsorships — Herrman and Sons Beef Jerky and AnythingOvernight.com and later Mac Tools — and went racing, scoring three wins in both the 2000 and 2001 seasons, including a win in Indy in 2000,

where they also won the champion Holley Dominator Duel.

While Brown and Peiser were contemplating their future at the end of the 2001 season, so was Brown's longtime friend and fellow rider Angelle Sampey, who just happens to be Billie Jo's cousin. Despite winning the championship, Sampey had just been released from her longtime ride with Star Racing, so she and Brown, who had finished second behind her in points, decided to join forces with her riding a second team bike. The plan was to race until midseason 2002 with the hopes of stirring up interest.

They headed to Pomona for the Winternationals, even though the class was not competing there, to network for sponsorships, and a chance encounter changed both of their lives.

The duo had previously approached Don Schumacher about adding their bikes to his mega team, but it didn't really come to fruition until they ran into Lt. Gen. Dennis D. Cavin, who was the U.S. Army's liaison with Don Schumacher Racing for the sponsorship of Tony Schumacher's Top Fueler, leaving the hotel one morning.

Once they explained their goals to Cavin, who saw the benefits of having two motivational spokespersons with the diversity that the duo offered, the wheels were in motion, and later that season, they joined the DSR team riding Army-backed Suzukis in what Brown considers a breakthrough accomplishment for the Pro Stock Motorcycle class.

Brown rode the Army Suzuki through the end of the 2007 season but scattered just five wins over those five seasons

before switching to Top Fuel in 2008 and, ultimately, reuniting with Schumacher a few years later.

Brown has parlayed these breaks into a hall of fame career that now includes not just three Top Fuel championships with Don Schumacher Racing but 66 national event wins, an even 50 of which have come since he switched from two wheels to four in 2008.

David Powers, who gave him his start in Top Fuel in 2008, and Mike Ashley, who took over the team in 2009, a team that already included tuners Brian Corradi and Mark Oswald, who later would guide Brown to his championships under the Don Schumacher Racing umbrella.

Brown's success in Top Fuel over the last decade has been almost otherworldly, but then the wheels came off last season during a turbulent year of adjusting to the departure of Corradi and a cylinder-head issue that went undiagnosed for almost half the season. They won just once, in Seattle, after having not won since the previous year's Seattle event.

If Brown was feeling the stress of fallow seasons, you couldn't see it in public, as he remained the constant cheerleader for his team, his guys, and his sponsors. It's just an innate part of who he is.

And beside him all the while, whether she was the girlfriend who lived states away, the supportive wife through his hard times, or the mother of their children, is Billie Jo, who he wed in February 2001. Brown's admiration and respect and love for his bride show no bounds.

That's Antron Brown is a nutshell. He's a team guy. And damned good at it.

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