

NHRA Perspective

Story: Doug Lewis/Photo: MSA Archive

In our last article, we talked about the Gainseville and it's impact on the sport. This time, I'll be talking about Atlanta Dragway, Georgia's House of Speed. We also discussed the Top Fuel Dragsters. I'd like to look at the next class of Top Fuel called Funny Car.

Atlanta Dragway was built in the early 70's and became an NHRA Sanctioned track in 1980. Next year marks the 40th anniversary of The Southern Nationals. All the biggest and best of the sport come here and race for the Wally. As fans, we watch (and feel) the cars pound the ground as they roar down the track. This track is known for Friday night qualifying. Each event gives the racers 4 rounds of qualifying starting on Fri. First round, Q1, starts in the afternoon around 3pm. Q2 starts later into the evening so the fuel cars run as darkness falls. The air temps go down, track temps go down and the header flames get taller. The first run off the trailer is used as a setup for the nighttime run where the big power can be used and put down on the cooler track. Q3 and Q4 on Saturday are race day setup runs where the crew chief can dial the car in foreliminations on Sunday. Only the quickest 16 cars get to race on Sunday, so it's important to make your best run Friday night.

The term Funny Car came from the origins of racing where racers would take a street car and modify it for traction and power. They'd move the rear axle forward, make the engine so big that it sticks out of the hood, change the front suspension to promote traction and get the weight on the back tires. There were some really funny looking cars, hence the term "Funny Car". Today's Funny Car is a purpose built tube chassis race car weighing in at 2550lbs, that loosely resembles today's street car, but makes 10,000hp and runs Zero to 330mph in less than 4 seconds. Unlike the dragsters with their long skinny 300" chassis and the engine

behind the driver, the Funny Car has the engine in front of the driver and a short 125" wheel base. The Funny Car doesn't accelerate quite as quickly as a dragster because it doesn't have the wheel base or the aerodynamics of the dragster. This also makes it a handful to drive. The driver is busy all 4 second of the run (sometimes longer). Even with a perfect run, the driver has to muscle the car around to keep it in the groove.

We follow a number of drivers and their teams. The 16-time Champion of the sport is John Force. He's taken the Wally home 149 times and is looking for number 150. John is a character too. He's always good for an interview and you just don't know what's going to come out of his mouth. There are many different drivers and crew chiefs with a lot of different personalities. Most teams are set up with 10-11 members starting with driver and crew chief. There are also team owners that have multiple teams and cars. Don Schumaker used to drive a Top Fuel Funny Car back in the 60's. Now he owns four Funny Car team and 3 Dragster Teams. His funny Car drivers are Ron Capps, Jack Beckman, Tommy Johnson Jr and Matt Hagan. John Force owns 2 Funny Car teams and one Dragster team with his daughter Britney Force as a driver.

Since every ticket is a pit pass, we the fans, have incredible access to the drivers and crew. After every pass down the track, the crew disassembles the entire engine and clutch assembly, then rebuilds the car for the next round. On race day, this can be done in as little as 45min. In your street car, this same job takes days to complete. Personally, I am fascinated with this process. These guys have practiced this process over and over where every move is choreographed. When the engine guy gets ready to pull the cylinder head off the right side of the engine, he pauses for just a second because the guy with the blower has to cross behind him first. That's how each move these guys make is



rehearsed over and over to be perfect. Occasionally, we'll follow a car back to their pits to watch the process right after a race. In the shutdown area, guys are there to retrieve the car and begin the process. They're undoing straps and lines and parts before the car even has a chance to cool off. When the car gets back to the pits, the guys fall upon the car like bees in a hive to the sound of air wrenches and parts flying. It's not uncommon to have all 8 piston in the racks in less than 7-min. Soon after, the crew chief gets the data for that run and makes the tuning decisions for the next run so the guys can start putting the engine back together. All the parts are ready and waiting. New pistons, new sleeves, new clutch assembly and new cylinder heads, all ready and waiting. If something bad happened in the run, they can even drop in a new engine.

One our favorite drivers is Tim Wilkerson. He drives the Levi, Ray & Shoup sponsored Shelby Mustang. Tim owns the team, drives the car and tunes the car. So he is the Owner, Driver and Crew Chief. That's a lot of jobs. He's also a pretty successful driver. He won Atlanta last year. This year started off with a Less than Stellar run of 4.38 and (only) 231mph. But in the nighttime run, Timmy laid down a 3.95 at 324mph which put him 4th on the ladder. Then on Sunday he beats Cruz Pedregon in the First Round, drives around Bob Tasca in a pedal fest and defeats Robert Height in the Semi Finals to race Ron Capps in the Final. That Final Round was close, but Ron left quicker to beat Tim in a Holeshot Win. Tim was just a little late on the tree. He ran a quicker 4.05 but lost to a 4.06 because of Ron's quicker reaction time. It's really cool to watch the races when you know the drivers and crew. Walking around in the pits, you see the teams working on the cars, and can chat with them when they're not busy. Jack Beckman is another of our favorites. Jack drives the Infinite Hero Top

Fuel Funny Car which helps our wounded warriors. Tommy Johnson Jr. drives the Make a Wish Funny Car. He's another driver that's really friendly and is a great spokesman for the late Terry Chandler and the Make a Wish Foundation. Over the years of going to this race, we've gotten to know the drivers and the crew members. It absolutely makes watching the Fox Sports TV coverage more fun when you know the players on the teams.

For me, it's hard to wrap my head around the money. To field a race car in 24 events across the country, with a minimum of 2 cars, 10 engine short blocks, 20 cylinder heads and all the other parts and pieces it takes, 10 crew members, a crew chief and a driver, costs about \$10 million. This is a grueling profession that runs on cubic money. This is why the sponsors are so important. The names on the sides, top and bottom of the cars are there because they paid to be there. These cars are rolling bill boards and advertising platforms to get the sponsors names in front of the people in the crowds, in the stands and on TV. It just so happens that the racing is cool enough to get the fans in the stands and rest of the world watching the excitement on TV.

My name is Doug Lewis and I own Ford Performance Specialists here in Mableton, GA. I enjoy taking my crew members to the race to let them see these guys and gals work on these cars with precision and perfection, so they know what it looks like and can do the same thing on our customers' cars and trucks. Meeting the crew and talking to the drivers makes it even more real. Watching them deal with race conditions and the Win or Lose aspects of a race day, makes it all more real and exciting. Join us at the next event here in Atlanta at the Southern Nationals. I hope to make it to Bristol for the next race.

23 Miles Per Gallon...

Into the Shop getting
10 Miles Per Gallon-

- DPF Delete Kit
- GearVendor Overdrive
- Gauges

23 MPG out the door -
Another satisfied
Ford truck owner

Call Us Today:
770.949.7191

FORD
Performance Specialists

"FPS works on
Fords Exclusively!"

Tech 770.949.7191 • eMail ShoGuy99@aol.com • Fax 770.485.9738 • Online FordSpecialists.com • Mableton GA 30126

Prices subject to change. Parts subject to availability. Some items limited by oil road use only. All for details on this and warranty info, visit us at Ford Motor Co. independently owned & operated. All vehicles shown are owned by customers of Ford Performance Specialists. Ford Performance Specialists is a registered trademark of Ford Motor Co. ©2010 Ford Motor Co. All rights reserved.