



Ashley Force Hood

Champ's Daughter Makes Her Own Way

She may be the daughter of drag racing icon John Force, but behind the wheel of her 310 mile-an-hour Castrol GTX Ford Mustang, one of the world's most powerful race cars, 27-year-old Ashley Force Hood has proved she has the game to match her name.

With eight final round appearances, a category best six No. 1 starts, a national performance record and a victory in the 55th annual Mac Tools U.S. Nationals, the sport's most prestigious single event, Force Hood demonstrated last year that she inherited more from her famous father than just his broad smile and quick wit.

In a breakout season in which she finished second to teammate Robert Hight in the Full Throttle driver standings (she would have been first under the scoring system in place before the NHRA opted for a playoff system in 2007), Ashley underscored her status as the hottest property in the NHRA Full Throttle Series.

Significantly, she demonstrated that she isn't just an occasional contender but a talent who can compete week-in and week-out in a Funny Car division that four years ago was thought to be too physically challenging for a woman.

After an apprenticeship in the sportsman division (where she won five times in Jerry Darien's A/Fuel dragster), she showed, in her rookie Funny Car season, flashes of the form that would make her one of the most popular young stars in the sport.

Winner of the Auto Club of Southern California's Road to the Future Award as the 2007 Rookie-of-the-Year, the graduate of Cal State-Fullerton substantially elevated her game in her second and third seasons with a young supporting cast anchored by the talented crew chief tandem of Dean "Guido" Antonelli and Ron Douglas.

As a result, in just her fourth pro season, she has emerged as one of the favorites to win the Full Throttle Funny Car championship secured last year by her brother-in-law, Robert "Top Gun" Hight.

The first woman to race in a Funny Car final (a loss to Tony Pedregon at the 2007 NHRA Las Vegas Nationals), she became the first to win a tour event and the first to lead the points in 2008. Now she is poised to become the first woman to win the NHRA championship in the 41-year history of the Funny Car class.

That said, she is not at all comfortable with being characterized as the "most successful female driver in Funny Car history."

"I think it's not such a big deal," she observed. "Yes, I am a female driver, but I had nothing to do with that. That was God and my parents. Besides, I have a team of men that work on my car and it's them and me, working together, that's put us in the position we're in to compete for a championship."



"Some day, if we could have an all-female team, now that would be something to talk about," she said. "To have females as the mechanics, the tuners and the driver, that would be amazing (and) I think it will happen in my lifetime. More and more women every year are moving up in the ranks. There are so many girls in Jr. Drag Racing and the sportsman categories that I see every week and those are the ones that (eventually) will move up to the professional level."

Meanwhile, Ashley's racing accomplishments, coupled with her pedigree, her Hollywood good looks and her accessibility, have translated into success off the track as well. In 2008, she accepted the Female Athlete of the Year Award from the Los Angeles-based Jim Murray Memorial Foundation. Before that, she won AOL Sports' inaugural "World's Hottest Athlete" poll, beating New England Patriots' quarterback Tom Brady in the tournament-style final.

One of the stars of the A&E Network series *Driving Force*, which ended a two-year run in 2007, she appeared on NBC-TV's *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, on ABC-TV's *Good Morning, America*, on the reality series *Designing Spaces* and last year further expanded her repertoire as a guest DJ on Los Angeles radio station KCRW-FM.

While she continues to serve as a spokesperson for BrandSource, to star in regional television ads for the Auto Club and to appear in Ford Motor Company's brochure for the Mustang, Ashley's likeness also graces the packaging for the 42, 46 and 52-inch high definition Sanyo televisions sold in Wal-mart stores.

Although she is an author herself, having penned a children's book that focuses on a day at the races, she was featured, along with her cat Simba, in a coffee table book by award-winning photographer David Woo entitled "Top Dogs and Their Pets."

That's pretty heady stuff for an admitted tomboy who once considered a career as a crew member, the basis for her decision to take elective courses in auto shop and welding while attending Esperanza High School (Yorba Linda, Calif.), where she also was a varsity cheerleader.

Ashley's "need for speed" is all in the genes. In addition to her father, who has won a record 126 NHRA tour events, her mother Laurie is licensed to drive a Super Comp dragster and her younger sisters, Brittany, 23, and Courtney, 21, are competing again this year in the Top Alcohol Dragster class.

Surprisingly, Ashley never seriously considered a driving career until her father sent her to Frank Hawley's Drag Racing School as a 16th birthday present.

Even though she began racing out of high school, her mother insisted that before she embarked on a full-time career, she had to earn her college degree. As a result, she spent her weekends racing and her weekdays in school, ultimately graduating from Cal State-Fullerton in 3½ years with a degree in Communications.

Her father could not be more proud, nor more surprised, by her career choice.

"I'm a typical father who always wanted his son to grow up and drive his race car," said the 14-time Auto Racing All-America selection, "but I don't have any sons, so I always hoped one of my girls would have an interest – but I didn't expect it."

Although she has been thrust into the spotlight, Ashley admits that she is not like her father in one very important way.

"I'm basically a shy person," she said. "I'm not comfortable in front of big crowds like dad. It doesn't come natural for me. In school, I was the only cheerleader who never led a cheer and the only person in choir (who never performed a solo). The driving part was easy. The other has been harder for me."

As for hobbies, Ashley admits she's a movie fanatic, just like her dad. However, she has taken her love for the cinema a step further. She not only likes to watch movies with her husband, Daniel, she also has demonstrated a talent for producing them in a studio her father constructed at the team's California corporate headquarters.

Now, though, she finds she spends a lot more time in front of the camera than behind it, a role that's certain to expand the closer she gets to the championship.

