



Austin Coil (John Force Crew Chief) Architect of a Dynasty

In an on-line poll conducted by nhra.com, almost 10,000 respondents were asked, simply, “who is the best crew chief (in the NHRA drag racing series)?” Not surprisingly, Austin Coil received seven of every ten votes cast (67.9%).

That’s not just more votes than everyone else in the Funny Car division. That’s more votes than everyone in Funny Car, Top Fuel, Pro Stock and Pro Stock Motorcycle. The closest to him in the balloting, seven-time Top Fuel Champion crew chief Alan Johnson, got 23.97% of the vote. No one else was in double figures.

The architect of a John Force Racing dynasty that has won 16 of the last 20 NHRA Funny Car championships, Coil actually was a drag racing superstar long before his driver, friend and employer won the first of his record 126 tour events.

He was a drag racing cult hero, in fact, as far back as the late 1960s when he and partners John Farkonas and Pat Minick began racing a Funny Car called the “Chi-Town Hustler” at places like Gary, Indiana, and West Salem, Ohio.

“None of us had any money,” Coil recalled, “so when we took the car out to race, we had to come home with some cash. The NHRA program, back in the early days, discouraged Funny Cars from participating.

“Plus, keep in mind that in the heyday of the ‘Chi-Town Hustler,’ if you didn’t run a national event, you could run three match race dates the same weekend for \$1,500 apiece. So we’d go run our booked-in deal and know we were coming home with \$4,500. Back then, even at Indy, if you won, you didn’t get any money – just a trophy.

“Our busiest season was probably 1970,” Coil recalled, “(when) we ran 96 match race dates with one car. ‘Jungle’ (the late ‘Jungle Jim’ Liberman) ran like 142 that year, but he had three (different) cars on the circuit. He didn’t personally drive all those dates. All of our dates were run by us with the same car, driven by Pat Minick.”

Unfortunately for Coil and Co., as the NHRA series gained in stature, match race dates began to evaporate. So, in 1982, the “Chi-Town Hustler” came out of the closet. With Frank Hawley as driver and Coil as tuner, the “Hustler” dominated the NHRA series over three seasons, winning seven races and two championships.

By 1984, however, it became clear to Coil that without a major sponsor, it would be impossible for the “Chi-Town Hustler” to continue to compete on the NHRA tour – at least at the highest level. That was the only reason he was open to a 1984 discussion with a relatively unknown Funny Car driver named John Force.

Coil initially rebuffed those overtures but, finally, he succumbed to Force’s persistence. The rest, as they say,



is history. Coil came on board in 1985 and, after two get-acquainted seasons during which their collaboration failed to earn a single victory, the two claimed a breakthrough win at Montreal, Canada, in 1987 and in 1990, won the first of their 14 NHRA championships together.

One of the sport's premier tuners long before the advent of on-board data recorders, Coil accurately anticipated the computer era and took the initiative to educate himself so that he would be ready to make the transition. Indeed, he has anticipated almost every trend by working far ahead of the pack.

"We work at it all the time," he said. "We have projects going that we know we can't finish within the next year, but we have to keep looking to the future. And you know, half the time the new projects get canceled by the (NHRA) rules committee before we even get a chance to try 'em – but we still gotta keep going to stay in front."

While the physical elements of professional drag racing have changed dramatically since Coil began racing in 1967, his philosophy has not.

"You can't start to think that anything is good enough other than total, complete domination," he said. "The only good thing about losing (is) you wind up going home with your tail between your legs saying 'I can't allow this ever to happen to me again.'"

After a miserable 2009 in which he and Force failed to win a race for the first time in 23 years, Coil has re-embraced that philosophy in his determination to make John Force Racing's 25th year with Castrol one of his most memorable.

"I feed off his energy," Coil said of Force, "but I'm able to bring him down to earth when he gets going in too many different directions. Each year he sets a higher standard for the team and then successfully motivates us to achieve our goals."

"I kind of get along with Force the way a person frequently gets along with his wife" is how Coil has characterized his odd couple relationship with the sport's winningest driver. "Like, there may be days when hollering and screaming are required, but it's not like we're thinking about leaving or anything. Our team motto is: 'it's often painful, but it's never boring.'"

A member of the International Drag Racing Hall of Fame, Coil is not yet ready to kick back and turn the reins over to Jimmy Prock, Dean Antonelli and the other "youngsters" at JFR.

"I have no plans on retiring," Coil said, "although at some point, before I'm 70, there are a couple of things I want to do that kinda interfere with the race schedule. One is a motorcycle tour of the Swiss Alps and the other is a vacation in the fall in Italy. But, in all honesty, I think a guy could fit those in between the races."

Unfortunately for the competition, Coil remains highly motivated, especially now that he has been paired with crew chief-turned-driver-turned crew chief Mike Neff, winner of the 2005 NHRA Funny Car title with driver Gary Scelzi.

"Drag racing is a lot like golf," he said. "Millions of people do it, but only a few make a real good living at it. I've been fortunate enough to be one of those few and I feel like it wouldn't take too long a period of non-motivation and you could fall right out of that situation and be one of the guys out there that are currently unemployed."

"You look around and there are some guys that have been at the top of their game who currently are not in demand. Well, I sure don't want that to happen to me even though I feel like, as long as John's alive, I've got a job for life. You still like to feel like you're worth it."

According to Coil, people are the biggest roadblock to continued success.

"To have 10 people that can work together is tough," he said. "To have 20 people that can work together is tougher (and) to have 30 people that can work together is really tough."

"Now we have more than 50 who are on the road with us on a regular basis. But we've been pretty fortunate with the guys that have come along. You lose a few crew guys every year, but that's just part of the game. We train a few more and life goes on. The key guys are still here and that's what matters."

