



Jerry Darien

Teaching the Next Generation

When Jerry Darien mashed the pedal on a Pro Comp dragster for the very first time back in 1976, drag racing was just a hobby; a way in which he at least temporarily could escape the lesson plans, pop tests and parent interactions that were so much a part of his day job as a Los Angeles school teacher.

Not for a moment did he consider the possibility that by combining his teaching expertise with his passion for drag racing he might one day be able to carve out a unique niche in the sport for himself and partner Ken Meadows.

"Brad Anderson (a respected engine builder) once asked me if I ever thought someone else would pay me to drive my car," Darien recalled. "I told him no. I figured that when I couldn't drive it anymore, I'd have to sell everything and quit."

Three decades down the road, Darien not only remains a major player in the Top Alcohol Dragster division in which his cars have won 20 NHRA tour events, he also is credited with helping develop an entire generation of new driving stars by putting them in his race cars for the ultimate in on-the-job training.

His alumni lineup includes four-time NHRA champion Gary Scelzi, Ashley Force Hood, Morgan Lucas, Brandon Bernstein, Frank Pedregon, Melanie Troxel and Steve Faria. His current students in the Darien School of High Performance are Courtney and Brittany Force, youngest daughters of 14-time NHRA Champion John Force.

"I think if a trophy was given to somebody who has really helped the sport, it ought to go to Darien and Meadows," Force has said, "(because) they've given so many young kids the opportunity. When you step up beyond Jr. Dragster and Super Comp, it's big money just to learn and guys like Darien give these kids a chance."

"It's kind of cool that I can continue to do this," Darien admitted, "but I get an awful lot of credit for stuff that I didn't do. Basically, all I do is provide a car in which these kids can develop their skills. Helping them to fulfill a dream is what makes it worthwhile. It's a good feeling when you help somebody succeed whether it's in the classroom or on the racetrack."

Owner of Specialty Fasteners, Inc., in Azusa, Calif., the 63-year-old Darien is the antithesis of the old adage "those who can, do; those who can't, teach."

For 15 seasons, Darien both prepared and drove his own dragsters at races close enough to home that he could be back in class on Monday. A four-time finalist at the national event level, he enjoyed his best



season as a driver in 1981 when he won the Winternationals at Pomona, Calif., and the Top Alcohol Dragster championship in the region that includes California.

“When it got to the point where I couldn’t do everything – buy parts, install parts, tune, tow and drive, I got together with Ken in a partnership deal and put Larry Sutton in the car,” Darien recalled. “I was going to start driving again (midway through the 1995 season) when Sceliz called.”

“We got to talking and he said, ‘you know, I wouldn’t mind driving that dragster of yours.’ And I said, ‘well, I wouldn’t mind letting you.’”

And so it began. Scelzi drove the Darien and Meadows dragster in 1995 and 1996, got a ride in Alan Johnson’s Winston Top Fuel dragster in 1997 and won professional championships in 1997, 1998, 2000 and 2005.

While Scelzi’s apprenticeship established Darien’s reputation, the former teacher deflects much of the credit.

“Basically, all I did was provide Gary with a place to show the rest of the world what he could do,” Darien said. “He learned a lot from me but by no means did I turn him into a world champion. He already was a good driver.”

Darien’s latest works-in-progress, Brittany and Courtney Force, required a little more attention, moving up as they did from 160 mile-an-hour Super Comp dragsters to BrandSource-backed A/Fuel cars that accelerate well beyond 275 mph. It’s the same career path followed by older sister Ashley who won five times for Darien and Meadows from 2004 through 2006.

