



John Force 14-Time Champ Faces New Challenge

Strapped into a special edition Ford Mustang celebrating his team's 25 years with BP Lubricants and the Castrol brand, drag racing icon John Force hopes to turn silver into gold this year in his bid for an unprecedented 15th NHRA Funny Car championship.

At an age at which his peers are content to manipulate nothing more challenging than a TV remote, Force will try to reverse recent fortunes and recapture the form that made his Castrol GTX High Mileage Ford the most feared Funny Car on the planet.

While other 60-somethings are punching the "recall" button on the TV remote, Force will punch the throttle on an 8,000 horsepower hybrid he believes can return him to the NHRA winners' circle he has visited a record 126 times in his career.

"We struggled," Force said of a 2009 season in which he failed to win at least one race for the first time in 23 years. "We know that. People said last year, 'you want Robert to win' or 'you want Ashley to win,'" referring JFR teammates Robert Hight and Ashley Force Hood, who finished 1-2 in Full Throttle points.

"Well, what about me?," Force asked. "I want to win too. I wouldn't be out here if I didn't and I've still got faith that we can turn it around for Castrol and Ford and Auto Club and BrandSource, me and (crew chief Austin) Coil and this team."

"Winning is the priority," Force said, "but it goes hand-in-hand with safety. Vince Lombardi said 'winning is everything' and I used to go with that. It's what I told my team, but I don't think Lombardi ever lost a man on the playing field."

That's a tragedy to which Force was subjected when Eric Medlen, the 33-year-old rising star whom he has characterized as "the son I never had," succumbed to injuries suffered in a 2007 testing accident at Gainesville, Fla.

It's an incident that changed Force and changed the sport forever.

Refusing to accept the explanation that Medlen's accident was a one-in-a-million fluke that never again could happen, Force created The Eric Medlen Project for race car safety in Brownsburg, Ind., and appointed John Medlen, Eric's dad, as manager.

The changes to the basic Funny Car chassis dictated by The Eric Medlen Project paid an immediate – and unexpected – dividend when Force himself crashed heavily in September, 2007, at Dallas, Texas, suffering injuries that required a month-long hospital stay and more months of physical therapy.



Nevertheless, while he suffered broken bones in both hands and both feet, broken fingers, broken toes, severe lacerations and tendon damage, the 14-time Auto Racing All-America selection had no head, neck or torso injuries and remarkably, five months after his crash, the sport's biggest winner not only was back in a race car, he was driving it into the semifinals at the season-opening Winternationals.

In June, 2008, he made it all the way back when he beat Tim Wilkerson in the final round to win the O'Reilly Summer Nationals at Topeka, Kan.

For Force, the only pro driver to have won 100 races and 1,000 racing rounds, the rub is that he hasn't won since. In fact, last year was the first since 1985 in which he didn't appear in at least one Funny Car final. That, he reiterated in the off-season, "isn't acceptable."

If he is able to accelerate his way back to the top of the Funny Car division, Force would become the oldest professional champion in motor racing history, adding yet another page to a resume that already includes 1996 Driver of the Year honors and 2008 induction into the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America.

Force makes no concessions to his age. At age 60, he insists that he's in "the best shape of my life. I still go to the gym every day. I owe to do that to give this team another shot at a title."

Of course, if he never won another race or another championship, the veteran's legacy would be secure. Nevertheless, he is anxious to prove once again that he has what it takes to win at the ultimate level.

A four-time winner of the Jerry Titus Memorial Award (as the driver receiving the most votes for the American Auto Racing Writers and Broadcasters Association Auto Racing All-America team) Force is more determined than ever to remain in the cockpit as teammate to a spectacular assembly of young drivers.

The current JFR driver lineup includes 27-year-old Ashley Force Hood, reigning Full Throttle champion Robert Hight, Mike Neff and Force's youngest daughters, Brittany, 23, and Courtney, 21.

"It's all about these kids now," he said. "I'm still going to race as hard as ever to win the championship. That won't change. But my main job now is to (continue to) train (these young) drivers so that they won't have to go through what I went through."

Significantly, Force remains the undisputed champion off the track where, long before his crash, he had won the rabid support of millions of blue collar Americans captivated by his self-effacing charm, non-stop banter and unexpected accessibility

In his fourth decade behind the wheel, he still sells more souvenirs, conducts more interviews and signs more autographs than anyone else in drag racing history. In fact, his expanding impact in the world market resulted in his 2005 acceptance of the John Bolton Award for motorsports achievement from AutoSport Magazine and his 2009 participation in a sports marketing forum hosted by Sports Business Journal.

Force's dominance in straight-line racing belies his early struggles. "Anything to get us to the next race," he has said.

"Anything" included dressing up as a clown for an appearance at Wendy's, with whom he had a brief sponsor relationship, and as an animated tree for a promotion at an auto dealership. He also appeared in TV ads for Wally Thor's School of Trucking and briefly considered joining his brother, Walker, in law enforcement before, as he tells it, "I flunked the inkblot test."

"I was too slow to play football in college," said the former quarterback at Bell Gardens (Calif.) High School. "Besides, I kept falling over until they figured out that one leg was shorter than the other (the result of a childhood bout with polio)."

With no license, no sponsor and, really, no clue, Force used a tax refund check and the money gleaned from an organ his mother-in-law won on a television game show appearance to buy a Vega Funny Car from his late uncle, Gene Beaver. He then hustled a winter booking in Australia – and the rest, as they say, is history.

Once back in the states, Force wanted nothing more than to compete. In his first 65 starts, he reached the final round nine times – but never won. Fortunately for the sport, persistence finally paid off with a win at Montreal, Canada in 1987. It proved to be just a stepping stone.

