



Mike Neff (Crew Chief) Fresh Start with Force

Mike Neff has excelled as both driver and crew chief in the NHRA Full Throttle Series. This year he is applying that versatility to a new and very special challenge.

In an erratic economy, one in which new sponsorship has become increasingly difficult to secure, Neff put a promising driving career on hold to partner with legendary crew chief Austin Coil in support of John Force, the 60-year-old drag racing icon whose 14 series championships and 126 tour victories are the most in NHRA history.

That unlikely mechanical alliance was made possible when Force opted to at least temporarily reduce his Ford Funny Car inventory from four Mustangs to three. So, after winning last November's Auto Club Finals at Pomona, Calif., in the process becoming the seventh different pro winner at John Force Racing, Inc., Neff finds himself back on the outside of the cockpit, looking in.

Working with Coil, the most decorated crew chief in history, Neff Californian has been assigned the task of putting a Castrol GTX High Mileage Mustang beneath Force that can return the 14-time Auto Racing All-America selection to the winners' circle from which he was excluded a year ago.

Ironically, it was Neff's work as crew chief to Gary Scelzi in 2005 that ended JFR's streak of 12 straight Funny Car championships. Five years later, he finds himself committed to helping Force win his 15th individual title and JFR its 17th overall.

Neff's victory at Auto Club Raceway at Pomona applied an exclamation point to his two seasons behind the wheel and put him in unique company as just the seventh man to win Funny Car races as both driver and crew chief. Notably, the 42-year-old was the first to do so in reverse order. The other members of that club, including Ed "the Ace" McCulloch, Mark Oswald, Jim Dunn, Leonard Hughes, Leroy Goldstein and Dale Emery, won first as drivers before later securing victories as crew chiefs.

A native of Hemet, California, Neff grew up racing dirt bikes and off-road trucks. He got his first motorcycle at age four and began riding competitively in motocross at 13. Significantly, he grew up with the sons of former team owner Larry Minor, with whom he raced off road trucks.

That relationship would prove pivotal because when Minor decided to return to Top Fuel racing on a limited basis in 1991, he signed Neff as a crew member to work with, among others, Dan Olson, currently the Director of Top Fuel and Funny Car Racing for the NHRA.

After Minor secured sponsorship from McDonald's, Neff jumped at the chance to go racing as a full-time mechanic on the Funny Car in which Cruz Pedregon ultimately beat Force for the 1992 NHRA championship.



He worked on that car through the 1994 season but, when Joe Gibbs bought the McDonald's team from Minor in 1995, he moved over to the Top Fuel dragster then driven by Cory McClenathan. As a Cory Mac crew member, he celebrated 22 victories over six years and a 1997 sweep of the challenging Western Swing (Denver, Seattle and Sonoma).

When Gibbs opted out of the sport in 2001, Neff moved to Don Schumacher Racing as assistant crew chief on a Funny Car driven by Whit Bazemore. He got his own car a year later, serving as crew chief to six-time former IHRA Pro Comp champion Scotty Cannon who subsequently gave up the seat to Scelzi. In four-and-a-half years with Scelzi, he went to 18 final rounds and won 11 times

"I was always the outdoors type – camping, water skiing, all that stuff," Neff said of his childhood. "I was always competitive."

Although he played baseball and football and wrestled while a high school student, Neff's passion was riding motorcycles and, later, working on off-road vehicles. It was while working on off-road trucks at night at Minor's shop that he learned to weld and fabricate, skills that would serve him well as a mechanic and, later, crew chief.

"I thought I could do it and I thought I could be good at it," Neff said of his brief stint behind the wheel, on that earned him the Auto Club's 2008 Road to the Future award as the NHRA's Rookie-of-the-Year. He started four races from the No. 1 qualifying position, went to the Final Four six times and never finished outside the Top 10.

