



Robert Hight New Champ Aims to Double Up

Now that he finally has fulfilled his drag racing destiny, Robert "Top Gun" Hight is focused this year on becoming just the second Funny Car driver in the last 22 NHRA seasons to win back-to-back championships.

Since 1988, the only driver to have repeated in the highly-competitive Funny Car division is John Force, Hight's teammate, father-in-law and winner of a record 14 individual titles, 10 of them in succession (1993 through 2002).

Nevertheless, few would bet against Hight, the former Force crew member whose success in his first five pro seasons belies a lack of previous driving experience. The former world class marksman hadn't driven a race car in any discipline when he was named the team's official "test driver" in 2004.

After taking over full-time responsibilities in the Automobile Club of Southern California Ford Mustang a year later, he justified Force's faith but starting from the No. 1 qualifying position in just his third event and then celebrating in the winners' circle one race later (at Houston, Texas).

The 40-year-old native of Alturas, Calif., hasn't slowed down since. He has delivered multiple tour victories in each of his first five pro seasons, posted five straight Top 5 finishes and become the third different JFR driver to win the championship.

"I just need 13 more championships and 112 wins to tie John," Hight joked last fall after a worst-to-first stretch run that included victories in three of the six races in the NHRA's Countdown to 1 playoffs.

The 2005 winner of the Auto Club's Road to the Future Award (Rookie-of-the-Year), Hight has won 13 times in a Mustang that has put up the best performance numbers for both the standard quarter mile (4.636 seconds) and the 1,000-foot distance (4.005 seconds) at which races have been contested since mid-2008.

"Almost not making this Countdown made it even more special," Hight said of the championship. "Coming so close so many times, it really is all about this team. I always believed that we would turn it around.

"I can't give John enough credit. He took a chance on a guy from northern California that had never driven anything but a Ford F-150 truck. He sold me to all the sponsors. He put me with the very best people and it is a like a dream come true."

"We were 12th going into Indy," Hight said, referencing the Mac Tools U.S. Nationals, the last event at which he could earn points to move him into the Top 10. "It's all about timing. Jimmy got it right at the right time."

Despite his lack of experience, no less an authority than 2005 champion Gary Scelzi identified Hight almost immediately as one of the tour's future stars.



“Robert Hight will be ‘Rookie of the Year.’” Scelzi said before the first race of the 2005 season. “He’s a marksman (a former trap shooting champion) and the concentration he uses in that sport is really helping him in the car. He’ll be a big player.”

In response to Scelzi’s praise, Hight won twice his first year, led the driver points for five races and did earn Rookie-of-the-Year honors, raising the bar for teammates Ashley Force Hood and Mike Neff, who won the same award in 2007 and 2008.

After toiling in relative obscurity for 10 seasons at JFR, first as a crew member and later as manager of the team’s California shop facility, Hight was ready when opportunity knocked. Now, as lead driver, he is hoping to secure the team’s 17th series title in the last 21 seasons.

It has been a rocket ride for the soft-spoken Californian who developed an early interest in all things mechanical and, by the time he was 16, already had restored a Plymouth Belvedere. That car would serve as transportation to college in Sacramento, where he earned AA degrees in both business and accounting.

Upon graduation, he began to look for opportunities in drag racing. After starting as a Top Fuel dragster mechanic (for Roger Primm Racing and driver Del Worsham), he took over as clutch technician on Force’s all-conquering Castrol GTX Funny Car midway through the 1995 season. In his first race as a JFR crewman (Denver, Colo.), Hight celebrated with Force in the winners’ circle.

While Hight was winning big on the track, he was winning even bigger off of it.

What began as a friendship with Force’s oldest daughter, Adria, slowly blossomed into a full blown romance that led to the couple’s 1999 wedding and the 2004 birth of daughter Autumn Danielle Hight. Nevertheless, Hight’s commitment to racing almost ended the relationship before it began.

“She would see a light on (at the shop) and stop by to talk,” he said of his wife. “She always asked me to go do things with her, but I wouldn’t. I was afraid I’d get in trouble because John made a point of reminding all the crew that dating his daughters was off limits. Finally, she told John and he came over to me and said, ‘hey, if you want to hang out with Adria, don’t worry about it. You’re not going to get in any trouble.’”

Although he always harbored the dream of driving a race car, Hight never believed that opportunity would present itself. It’s a perception that changed in 2003 when Force opted to give the late Eric Medlen, Hight’s friend and crewmate, a chance to drive the car vacated by Tony Pedregon.

Ultimately, Medlen’s driving success gave validity to Force’s “Next Generation” initiative and Hight credits the six-time tour winner, who lost his life in a 2007 testing accident, with helping him through his rookie season.

If there was a victim of Hight’s total commitment to his racing career, it was his “other life” as a world class marksman. One of a small number of shooters to have achieved the Grand Slam of marksmanship – 200 straight targets at the standard 16-yard distance, 100 straight at the maximum handicap distance (27 yards) and 100 doubles (two targets at once) in the same competition – he was good enough to be considered for a berth on the U.S. Olympic team. Although he didn’t pursue the opportunity, he has applied the sport’s hand-eye coordination and concentration skills to his driving.

“I definitely think that dealing with the pressure of shooting helped (my driving),” Hight said. “The thing that surprised me, I guess, was that the pressure in racing is a lot more intense. In shooting, if you screw up, basically the only person you hurt is yourself. But when you screw up in the race car, you’re not just letting yourself down, you’re letting down everyone else on the team. That’s real pressure.”

Like so many American youngsters, Hight grew up dreaming of a career in baseball. Although he never played professionally, his drag racing success has provided him with an opportunity to meet some of his baseball idols, notably former Los Angeles Dodgers’ manager Tommy Lasorda, and to drive a special edition Auto Club Ford that commemorated the Dodgers’ 50th anniversary in Los Angeles.

