



FIRST TIME ON THE DRAG STRIP

By Nick Calderone
Photos by Steven Fabian

Even if you don't follow the sport of drag racing, there's a good chance you saw video of Ron Capps' NAPA-sponsored funny car erupt like a volcano. The 2014 NHRA drag racing season opened with a boom when Capps experienced a catastrophic engine failure at Pomona Raceway back in February. The incident was so violent and stunning to watch that the video exploded in the media and online, garnering hundreds of thousands of views. What was even more spectacular was that Capps walked away, shaken but uninjured, after his 5000-horsepower bomb blew up in his face. The event was an astounding testament to modern race car safety and a reminder of how heroic these guys are to me.

When I was about eight years old, I remember going to the school book fair and getting a softcover picture book called *Burnout*. It was packed with tire-shredding, flame-spitting, earthshaking images of funny cars and dragsters. I was fascinated. While other kids worshipped Batman and Spider-Man, the drivers in this book became my superheroes. They wore colorful fire suits and menacing helmets, and drove cars with names like The Avenger, Red Bandit, Banshee, and Challenger. They climbed under fiberglass bodies and slipped into narrow roll cages next to hulking engines that occasionally blew to bits in spectacular fashion. The book was

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mostly pictures, but the few paragraphs inside taught me about the Christmas tree, burnouts, and most importantly, how much I loved motorsports.

The NHRA does a great job of reaching out and promoting their sport, and as a member of the media, I occasionally get to benefit from their public relations. I was giddy when their press release popped into my email offering rides in the Frank Hawley Drag Racing School two-person dragster.

I rewatched the Capps video multiple times—left me slack-jawed every time. I watched it about an hour before I drove down to Wild Horse Pass Motorsports Park (formerly Firebird Raceway) to strap myself into the high-powered Hawley dragster. My excitement overwhelmed any fears.

Frank Hawley, a legendary drag racing champ, was in the pits himself and helped get me into my fire suit and hel-

met. Hawley's racing school is regarded around the world as the best of its kind.

The whole process of getting suited up, from pulling the balaclava over my head, to zipping up the fire-resistant jacket, to listening to the rundown of instructions, was exciting and made me feel a little like a superhero. The anticipation of knowing that I was about to go as fast as I'd ever gone on land was making my heart pound.

Protected and briefed, I climbed into the passenger seat of the narrow racer. Step on the seat, squat, reach up, grab hold of the roll bar, and slide down into the metal pan (DO NOT hold on to the three-inch plastic windshield!). Hawley helped cinch the multipoint harness tight and slipped my hands through a pair of loose retention loops. If we were to roll over, the loops would keep my arms from flying out and getting smeared on the tacky surface of the drag strip.

To my left, in the driver's seat, was the second closest man to Ron Capps' explosion. Jack Beckman, pilot of the Valvoline-backed top fuel funny car, had slowed down just before Capps' ride burst into a bunch of fiberglass and metal bits. Some of the larger pieces had landed in Beckman's lane, causing damage to his front end.

Beckman is simply a cool dude and a plain old nice guy. He's known as "Fast Jack" around the racing circuit and has trained thousands of drivers as an instructor at Frank Hawley's racing school. It's why he's so kind behind the wheel and understands that even though it may be his millionth time down the quarter mile, it's my first.

The 800-horsepower of the twin seater may be a fraction of the 5000 of a typical funny car, but it feels thunderous behind my back when Beckman flicks the starter. The pop of each cylinder rattles down my

spine. This truly is a childhood dream come true. Memories of that old book have just become reality as I stare at the Christmas tree. Jack stages the car, and I hold my right foot over an imaginary pedal to test my reaction time against his. I was slow, to say the least.

Blink, blink, blink, BOOM! I'm pressed into the cockpit and accelerated to 100 mph in less than 5 seconds. It's exhilarating and despite the speed, the blast down the quarter mile seems to take longer than expected. I belt out a primal roar the length of the track. Not from fear, but from pure joy of finally experiencing what gobs of horsepower really feels like. We flash across the line in less than 9 seconds at 154 mph. Beckman lifts off the throttle and I immediately let go of the dummy steering wheel in front of me and clap and giggle and yell. I wanted to do it again and again.

It was impossible for my brain to wrap around the fact that my 154 mph,

scenery-smearing run was approximately half as fast as a true top fuel car runs. How do these guys do it? How do they do it knowing the engine bolted inches from their ass is tuned to ride the line between explosive power and actual explosion?

I don't think I'll ever forget the heroic feeling of staring down that empty track and blasting off, much as I never forgot the book that introduced me to this sport so many years ago.

Want to catapult your own rear end into your lifelong racing dreams? Frank Hawley's Drag Racing School has courses starting at \$399, and you can take the wheel yourself. ■

NICK CALDERONE is a host of the nationally syndicated news and entertainment show *RightThisMinute*. A lifelong car and motorcycle fan, Nick may not be an expert, but he is certainly an enthusiast. The coolest car he's ever owned was a 1986 Nissan 300ZX, and he currently rides a 1984 Honda Goldwing. Nick can be reached at [facebook.com/nscaldereone](https://www.facebook.com/nscaldereone) or on Twitter @nscaldereone.



FRANK HAWLEY DRAG RACING SCHOOL

Based in Gainesville, Florida, the Frank Hawley Drag Racing School offers Dragster Adventures (no previous experience required), drag racing competition licensing programs and group events (corporate, media, ride and drive, team building, bachelor parties and more).

The Dragster Adventure course is specifically designed for those drivers who want to drive a dragster and compete in side-by-side racing, without committing the time and resources required to become a licensed race car driver in one of Hawley's licensing programs. The Dragster Adventure provides drivers with full-size competition-styled cars that can travel 0-60 mph in just 3 seconds and reach 130 mph in the quarter-mile—and offers side-by-side racing!

You can purchase a Dragster Adventure gift certificate for your favorite adrenaline junkie for the surprise of their lifetime.

Dragster Adventure will be headed west again this year, with sessions scheduled in California during June and October.

- 866-480-7223 toll free
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Familiar for years as Firebird International Raceway, Wild Horse Pass Motorsports Park offers thrilling spectator events, club racing, corporate outings and experiential marketing, at a facility engineered for motorsports and other exhilarating activities. The 450-acre park has options for racers, event promoters and fans alike. Included are three road course circuits, acres of pavement for autocross and skid-pad use, a 120-acre motorsports lake for drag boat racing and other uses, a quarter-mile NHRA drag strip, an off-road truck racing course and more. The facility is also home to the world famous Bob Bondurant School of High Performance Driving.

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