

Elapsed weekend

NHRA AT WILD HORSE PASS MOTORSPORTS PARK

Story and photos by Randall Bohl

We hadn't been out to NHRA drag racing at Wild Horse Pass Motorsports Park (formerly Firebird International Raceway) in a half dozen years. We jumped at the chance to revisit what are now 320-plus-mile-per-hour Nitro Methane burners and 200-plus-mile-per-hour Pro Stock racers.

Every February, Arizona is host to the second race of the NHRA Mello Yello Drag Racing Series season: the CarQuest Auto Parts NHRA Nationals. Most people simply call it the Arizona Nationals.

We connected with Motorsports Maniac Wally Cahill, who reports each Sunday for "Good Morn-

ing Arizona" on 3TV Phoenix. This particular weekend, he was arranging live shot NHRA driver interviews, while also reviewing the Audi A8 from the track with meteorologist Kim Quintero.

GENDER BIAS

One story hook could be "the women of drag racing," but successful women in drag racing are more the norm than a novelty these days.

Looking back several decades, Shirley Shahan had been the first NHRA national event-winning female in Top Stock at the 1966 Winternationals. Another Shirley, three-time Top Fuel Champion Shirley Muldowney, was another obvious exception. But they were not alone for long.

There have been literally dozens of professional female drivers over the past 50 years. In fact, Carol Bunny Burkett celebrated 50 years behind the wheel in April, much of that time in BB/FC—a Sportsman class, but her livelihood nonetheless.

Della Woods ran AA/FC from the 1960s through the early '90s. Paula Murphy in 1966 was the first female Fuel Funny Car driver. "Miss Mighty Mopar" Judy Lilly ran through the late 1960s and '70s.

"Nitro Nellie" Goins was the first African-American female AA/FC driver, and Cristen Powell the first female AA/FC driver in the 4-second zone.

The pace of women entering the sport sped up from the 1990s into this century, with drivers such as Danielle DePorter, Top Fuel 1992 NHRA Rookie of the year recipient; Shelly Anderson, Lori Johns, and Melanie Troxel, all in Top Fuel dragsters; Ashley Force in Funny Car; and Angelle Sampey, three time Pro Stock Motorcycle Champion (2000-2002). They seemed to come along one at a time, but today there are more female professional drivers than ever before.

We spent Friday afternoon and Saturday photographing Qualifying and doing a little touring of the spectator midways, as well as the pits. It was clear the times they have been changing. We had a list of five drivers we would meet with for Channel 3 on Sunday morning, so we watched them closely. Three of those five were women.

In Top Fuel dragster, there were three women entered, out of 17 participants: Brittany Force, Leah Pritchett and Jenna Haddock.

In AA/FC, there were two women out of 17 en-

trants: Alexis DeJoria and Courtney Force.

In Pro Stock, there was just one female entrant out of 17: Erica Enders-Stevens—who just happens to be the first female and reigning Pro Stock Champion.

Our list of five included Brittany Force, Courtney Force and Erica Enders-Stevens, along with male drivers J.R. Todd and Del Worsham.

QUALIFYING

Friday afternoon, the weather could barely have been better for Qualifying—about 80 degrees, with mostly cloudy skies keeping the track cool.

Side-by-side runs were phenomenal, although in Qualifying round number one, Brittany Force had a tire smoking shut-off. J.R. Todd took the third position with a 3.776 ET at 323.97 mph, while Tony Schumacher led the way with a 3.750 ET at 313.15 mph.

In Funny Car, sister Courtney Force landed in the seventh spot with a stout 4.095 ET at 306.19 mph. Del Worsham had a shut-off 7.522 ET and Matt Hagan took the number one spot running 4.025 ET at 316.60 mph.

In Pro Stock, Erica Enders-Stevens stepped into the number two spot with a 6.551 ET at 211.26 mph, trailing right behind fellow Houston-based

racer Rodger Brogdon by just over 1/10th of a second, with Brogdon running a 6.545 ET at 210.90. Both run Elite Motorsports powerplants, the dominant engine builder this past season and Erica Enders-Stevens' primary sponsor.

The second round of Qualifying began about 4:30 pm, with the air cooling, bringing the density up a bit, improving engine performance, and with the track in excellent condition.

Brittany Force stepped up to the number eight qualifying position with a 3.088 ET at 323.81 mph, while J.R. Todd remained in the third spot with an improved 3.753 ET at 323.97 mph, and Tony Schumacher remained number one, setting a new track record with a 3.722 ET at 325.61 mph. The crowd let out a roar of approval.

Courtney Force rolled out a blistering 3.996 ET at 321.58 mph to take the first qualifier's position, with another resounding roar of approval from the stands. Alexis DeJoria fired off a 4.000 ET at 313.58 mph to land the ladies' number one and number two at the end of the day. Del Worsham not only got down the track in this round, but with the number three spot, running 4.005 ET at 318.17 mph. That's only 9/1000 of a second between the first and third qualifying positions.

Matt Hagan ran another 4.025 ET identical to

the first round, this time only good for the fourth spot, but it's hard to beat that kind of consistency come race day.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Saturday, we spent time walking the pit area—which can be half the entertainment of going to the drag races. Unlike a lot of other motorsports, fans have always been welcome in the pits at the drags—seeing the crews prepare the cars, with a crowd gathering around as a Nitro Methane engine is warmed up ... then the crowd thinning out, with burning noses and watery eyes, at least those who get in the wrong position or downwind of the fumes. (However, this may truly be the perfect cure for a stuffy, sniffly, sneezy cold.)

Certain teams draw more attention than others. Don Shumacher Racing, fielding seven cars including reigning Funny Car Champion Matt Hagan and the ever popular Tony "Sarge" Schumacher (with 77 National event wins) is a huge draw. (Make that 78 National Event wins as of that Sunday.)

Kalitta Racing, the legendary Connie Kalitta's operation, with drivers Doug Kalitta T/F, J.R. Todd T/F, Del Worsham F/C and Alexis DeJoria F/C, is always a busy area.

And John Force Racing may be the most con-

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Del Worsham, here being guided back from his burnout in the DHL-sponsored Kalitta Racing Funny Car, would go on to an eventual runner-up finish.

sistently surrounded pit area, fielding a four-car team: Robert Hight F/C, John Force F/C, Courtney Force F/C and Brittany Force F/C. His daughters may be beautiful, but *nobody* is more fan friendly or draws attention like John Force himself, constantly out on the fringe of the pit area greeting fans, signing autographs and posing for photos with fans. He has to be wrangled back by crew and family, to work with his team in privacy.

In the Pro Stock pits, the place to be was Erica Enders-Stevens' trailer. The 2014 Pro Stock Champion is very, very popular.

The fan/sponsor midway at NHRA events compares (dare we say?) to NASCAR, at least on a relative scale for a smaller facility. There's the Mello Yello NHRA drag racing tent, with interactive activities such as "test your starting line reaction time." Nitro Mall is a huge apparel and souvenir shopping experience. Traxxas, as a major sponsor, took up a large central area, with radio controlled cars sailing about on jump ramps, controlled by Traxxas employees as well as by fans. And for festival atmosphere, there are beer, dogs and barbecue. We stuck to the sponsor soft drink, Coca-Cola (maybe should have had a Mello Yello?).

FINAL QUALIFYING

The fourth and final round of Pro Qualifying commenced Saturday at 4 pm, and we chose the high road, climbing to the top of the starting line tower to photograph the race cars from above the starting line. It's a unique perspective, heavy with nitro fumes and Goodyear tire smoke wafting up on the desert breeze.

In the end, Tony Schumacher remained atop the Top Fuel field with a 3.7222 ET at 325.69

(consistency—he had run a 3.7222 at 325.61 on Friday afternoon). J.R. Todd ended up in the fourth spot with his 3.753 from Friday afternoon's session, and Brittany Force in the 10th spot, also from her Friday afternoon run of 3.792. It was apparent that conditions had not improved over those of Friday, as there had been more sun on the track throughout the afternoon and the humidity had increased.

It was a similar situation in Funny Car, with one major exception. Matt Hagan made a move up from the fourth spot to number one with a 3.978 ET at 320.28, bumping Courtney Force to number two, still using her 3.996 ET from Friday afternoon. Del Worsham remained in the number three spot, with a slightly improved 3.997 ET at 319.98 in this round, and Alexas DeJoria remained in fourth with her Friday afternoon shot, a 4.000 ET.

In Pro Stock Qualifying, the story was simple: identical ETs for the top two qualifiers, Erica Enders-Stevens and Rodger Brogden, both running 6.545 seconds, but Erica becoming number one with a top speed of 211.20 mph over Rodgers' 210.90 mph.

SUNDAY RACE DAY

Our Sunday at the track began before dawn, 6 am to be exact, meeting up with Wally Cahill, NHRA director of media relations Anthony Vestal, and the Channel 3 remote truck with Kim Quintero.

We headed back to the pro pit with the remote truck and the Audi A8. From 7 am until 9:45, Kim and her cameraman, both with ear buds, would take direction from the station as to when to go live—Kim first, doing a 2-minute weather report,

somehow, with nothing but a smartphone in hand, then turning to a short driver interview. The interviews were kept very basic, in layman's terms, as she explained to the drivers that "most of our viewers have no idea what you do"—not necessarily flattering, but they seemed used to that.

Our first stop was with Kalitta Racing and Top Fuel driver J.R. Todd, who in a little pre-interview did an excellent job of explaining Qualifying and how as number four he would race number 13 in the first round, and the fact that they have 75 minutes between rounds to rebuild motors and have the car back to the line. It was all helpful, as Kim had never been to the drag races before.

Del Worsham is driver of the DHL-sponsored Kalitta Racing Funny Car. We spoke with Worsham prior to his live shot, as he worked on untangling and folding his parachutes, a responsibility many drivers insist upon taking on for themselves—nobody else to blame if their chutes don't come out. Del learned this growing up at the drag races, as his father Chuck Worsham has been a funny car racer driver/owner since before Del was born. In fact, Del nodded with pride at the minimally sponsored car across the aisle from his DHL car—Worsham & Fink, driven by Shane Westerfield. Del was very happy that his father's team had qualified in the 15th spot, and that's what he wanted to talk about. (Unfortunately, that paired them with number two Courtney Force in the first round, and a loss.)

After Del Worsham's television spot, we turned around to find Erica Enders-Stevens waiting to lead us to her Pro Stock pit. While waiting for a "go" from the TV studio, we had time to photograph Erica and speak for a moment. When we

entered her pit with cameras, a crewman immediately threw a large towel over the intake and manifold of the exposed Elite Motorsports motor—completely understandable, as this is an Unlimited class, and a lot of the secrets are in making these normally aspirated motors breathe. We had to ask, though, about the black drapery around the rear end of the car—done nicely, we might add, with permanent button clips on the body. A crewman was in fact climbing in and out from under the car, working with lights under this shroud. Erica explained it was about the 4-link—"we don't want anyone to see how the 4-link is set up, or any suspension settings, even what rear end we have under the car, if we can help it." As for the manifold towel, she reminded us of the story of Bob Glidden climbing out of what was left of his car after a severe crash years ago, lucky to be alive, but—first things first—removing his fire suit jacket and covering the motor so nobody could see it. (This is worth a YouTube look.)

TV time interrupted us at this point. Channel 3 called for Wally's Sunday morning car review of the Audi A8—which had been garnering a lot of fan attention early in the morning, even sitting among 300 mph race cars.

While Wally and Kim did their segment, we headed to the Force Racing camp and found Brittany Force signing autographs and posing for photos with fans, before she had to warm the car. We spoke together of her need for sponsorship on the Top Fuel dragster. Her lips were sealed, but she indicated a deal was close.

We walked around the back of the trailer, to find quite the outdoor kitchen providing breakfast for the whole John Force Racing team. They had a hot grill going, with omelets and sausage, as well as fresh fruits and juice. We tried not to stare like hungry puppies.

Besides, the Nitro Methane fumes from Courtney's Funny Car pit next door were sufficient entertainment for the time being—she too had engine warming duties. We reminded Courtney we'd met a few years ago, when she was doing appearances for Ford Motor Company's teen driver safety program at Coronado High School in Scottsdale and Perry High School in Gilbert (see our Jan/Feb 2012 issue online).

Kim Quintero arrived, complimenting Courtney on her makeup, to which she replied, "yeah, haha, you should see it after the first run in the car." Kim's main question in the live shot was what

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(Left) Rodger Brogden emerges victorious after the Pro Stock final. • (Right, top to bottom, left/right) Our five picks to watch: Brittany Force, Courtney Force, Erica Enders-Stevens, J.R. Todd and Del Worsham.



Courtney did to prepare for a run. She responded that she's not as outgoing as her father, tending to stay a little quieter, closer to the trailer and concentrating on the job at hand. And, referring to the feast cooking behind us, she recommends "light portions, before you pull three or four G's accelerating and six G's when the chutes hit."

RACE TIME

By the time we walked back through the pits, pre-race driver introductions had begun behind the starting line—and the show was on. Our time with the drivers made watching them on track all the more fun. Certainly every fan who gets to shake John Force's hand and take a snapshot with him feels the same way.

We watched "our" five drivers throughout the day, and two made it to the final round.

In Top Fuel, Brittany Force defeated Steve Torrence in round one with a 3.822 ET at 323.19 mph. Unfortunately, she was defeated by Doug Kalitta in round two—Doug running a 3.777 to Brittany's 3.799. Doug would go on to the final round, where Tony Schumacher (number one qualifier at 3.725 ET) won with another 3.72, this one with a zero on the end—3.720 ET—garnering his 78th National Event win. You can't beat consistency, especially being consistently fast.

In Funny Car, Courtney Force took out Shane Westerfield in the aforementioned Worsham & Fink car, with a 4.022 ET at 320.13 mph—only to meet teammate Robert Hight in the second round, losing an incredibly close race won by Hight with a superior reaction time of .094 to Courtney's .115 overruling a 4.069 ET to Courtney's 4.057. The margin of victory: .009 seconds.

Meanwhile, Del Worsham beat John Hale in round one with a 4.037 ET at 317.05 mph, Chad Head in the second round with a 4.047 ET at 316.38 mph and Robert Hight in the third round running a 4.010 ET at 315.78 mph.

Thus ended the day for the John Force Racing team in the semifinals, John himself having been defeated by Robert Hight in the first round. A problem for the team was that the order in which they qualified had pitted team member against team member in rounds one and two.

So "our driver" Del Worsham had made it to the Finals to meet number one qualifier Matt Hagan from the other side of the ladder. Del's ETs throughout the first three rounds had been consistently .01 second quicker than Matt's, leaving us optimistic about who we'd meet at the top end for the winner's photo op.

Note that after the first two rounds, we had

gone to the "top end" or final turnoff at the end of the racetrack to photograph the drivers during ESPN II interviews after their runs. "Optimistic" is nice, but reality is that crew chiefs and drivers throw it all into the final, and Matt Hagan not only was the number one qualifier, but 2014 NHRA Funny Car Champion, as well as winner of the Winternationals in Pomona just two weeks prior. He knows how to win.

Hagan stepped up to a blazing 3.975 at 324.83 mph, bettering his number one qualifying pass by 3/1000 of a second and more than 4 mph. Del, in the other lane, had run a duplicate to his semifinal ET: 4.010 at 318.17mph (2.39 mph faster) in a losing effort. So we gladly photographed champion Matt Hagan hoisting the trophy at the top end—smiles all around.

"Our" other driver, Erica Enders-Stevens in Pro Stock, marched through her side of the 16-car field, beating Joey Grose in the first round with a 6.575 ET at 211.23, Greg Anderson in the second round running a 6.570 at 210.60 and in the semifinals Chris McGaha with another 6.575 ET, this one at 210.67 mph.

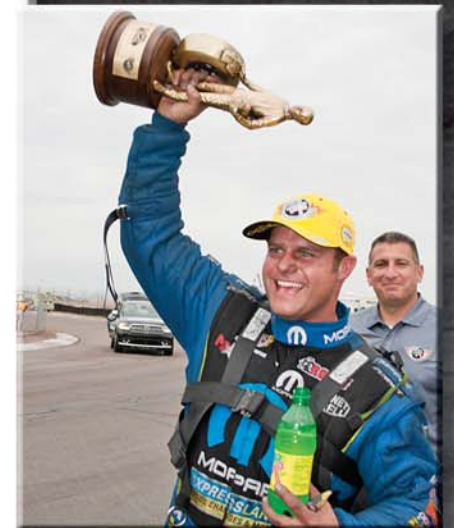
From the other side of the ladder came number one qualifier Rodger Brogdon, running slightly quicker and faster than Erica in each round, including his semifinal win over Drew Skillman with a 6.554 ET at 211.36 mph. Although this didn't bode well for "our driver" Erica, Brogdon was one friendly, happy guy to meet when he came out of the car after his semifinal win. And he did have a bit of an underdog's appeal, being self-financed with only a small RoofTec logo to show for sponsorship. Nonetheless, he was facing the reigning champion in the final.

In the final round, Enders-Stevens cut a .017 reaction time to Brogdon's .050, only to experience an engine failure, slowing to a 6.640 ET at 205.51 mph. Brogdon motored on through, with a victory-clinching 6.560 at 211.49 mph—his quickest and fastest pass of the day.

As it turns out, we were witnessing only the second National Event win for Rodger Brogdon. And, ironically, it turns out his first was in 2013 against none other than Erica Enders-Stevens.

Now 2-0 in finals over the reigning Pro Stock Champion, Rodger Brogdon's search for sponsorship should become a little easier, which could give him the opportunity to run the full season, as opposed to his self-financed plan to run six or seven races. We wished him well at the top end.

And couldn't help but smiling on the way out of the track, having enjoyed a great three-day weekend at the races. ■



(Top to bottom) John Force gets ready to rumble. Brittany Force lights 'em up. Matt Hagan earns his Funny Car trophy in a nail-biter. Tony Schumacher takes his 78th National Event win. And the crowd takes it all in.