

PICKING WINNERS. OR NOT.

A FUN DAY OF NHRA AT WILD HORSE PASS MOTORSPORTS PARK

STORY AND PHOTOS BY RANDALL BOHL

As in years past, we visited the NHRA Mello Yello Drag Racing Series Arizona Nationals at Wild Horse Pass Motorsports Park with Wally Cahill, who does the *Good Morning Arizona* car reviews on 3TV Phoenix, Sunday mornings. Normally, meteorologist Kim Quintero broadcasts driver interviews live from the races, but this year, no pun intended, Kim was a bit under the weather. Thus the live remote schedule was altered to Wally doing a review—this year of a 707-hp Dodge

Challenger SRT Hellcat Widebody in Octane Red—and one driver interview.

We met up with Wally predawn in the pits, at the trailer of Funny Car driver Ron Capps of Don Schumacher Racing. Even if you're not a big drag racing fan, you may know Ron from the NAPA Auto ads he's done for years.

Capps was given a tour of the Challenger Hellcat as Cahill gave his review of the car, and when Wally opened the trunk to show off its massive subwoofers, he also pulled out a guitar signed by Alice Cooper—a perk awaiting the purchaser of this particular Hellcat from Airpark Dodge Chrysler Jeep, Alice's dealership in Scottsdale.

From there, we went down to the Kalitta Motorsports camp and met with JR Todd, driver of the DHL-sponsored Funny Car, for the second live shot interview of the morning, at about 9:15 am. Given that Kim Quintero broadcasting live would have done as many as eight

spots, this was an easy start to the day, so we retired to the Don Schumacher Racing hospitality tent for hot coffee on a chilly morning and saw Top Fuel driver Leah Pritchett chatting up the crowd and presenting Sparkling Ice, naturally flavored sparkling water. A complimentary bottle of Ginger Lime came in very handy later, as the day warmed from three layers of clothing to T-shirt weather.

At this point, our favorite racers to watch for the day had been chosen in a completely unscientific way: Ron Capps or JR Todd in Funny Car, Leah Pritchett in Top Fuel, and Erica Enders in Pro Stock, simply because we had met her in previous years.

As pre-race got under way, we headed for the grandstands to be spectators for the day. The first round went well for three out of "our" four drivers. Number four qualifying Leah Pritchett defeated number 13 qualifier Troy Buff in Top Fuel. Number eight qualifying JR Todd

was defeated by number nine qualifier Matt Hagan—"our" first upset of the day, although Matt Hagan is a former champion never to be taken lightly. "Our" man now in Funny Car, number two qualifier Ron Capps, defeated number 15 qualifier Tim Wilkerson handily.

In Pro Stock, Erica Enders, also a number two qualifier, defeated number 15 qualifier Steve Graham.

It was a good first round for "our team."

Second round competition changed everything. Leah Pritchett smoked the tires and was defeated by number 12 qualifier Scott Palmer, who would go on to beat Greg Carrillo of Glendale, Arizona, who, it happens, had been a giant-slayer in rounds one and two and had become the home town favorite in the grandstands.

Greg Carrillo qualified 16th and defeated both Tony Schumacher and Antron Brown on his way to meet Scott Palmer in the semifinals. Palmer would prevail and be the underdog, going into the finals against number two qualifier Steve Torrence. By the end of sec-

ond round in Top Fuel, it was clear that the track was hotter and slicker than during qualifying, and the big hitters were having trouble getting the power to the ground.

In Funny Car, it was no different. Ron Capps smoked the tires and was defeated by number 10 qualifier Shawn Langdon, who had upset Cruz Pedregon in round one, another victim of tire smoke. Langdon went on to run a respectable 3.95.8 and 325.77 mph in the semifinals, but lost to Tommy Johnson Jr, who was now on his way to face number one qualifier Courtney Force in the Funny Car final.

In Pro Stock, Erica Enders was upset by number seven qualifier Chris McGaha on a hole shot win—Erica running 654.9 to Chris's 656.1. The difference was at the starting line, as Chris cut a .031 light to Erica's .057. McGaha continued his lightning fast leaves, defeating Alex Laughlin in the semifinals with a .016 reaction time and winning the Pro Stock final over Jason Line with a .007 reaction time, as well as outrunning Line 6.529 to 6.538.

After all of the upset races of the day, the

Funny Car final did find Courtney Force the number one qualifier, having run roughshod over her side of the ladder, facing number six qualifier Tommy Johnson Jr.

There was to be no surprise in the Funny Car final—Courtney laid down a beautiful 3.834 elapsed time at 337.16 mph, to Tommy's trailing 6.814 at only 101.57 mph.

The Top Fuel final was a similar scenario, as number two qualifier Steve Torrence—having run through his side of the ladder with solid performances—met good friend but underdog Scott Palmer and ran a blistering 3.729 at 330.72mph to Scott's lagging 6.449 at only 102.70 mph.

As is often the case at the races, conditions change, track temperature is all important, and tuner and driver skills were tested. We saw a lot of driving on this day—some would call it a "pedal-fest" in the fuel ranks. It was not a driver's dream, but quite a show for the sold-out crowd.

It's always a good day at the races, even if "our team" didn't win. ■

Below: Funny Car winner Courtney Force. // At right (left to right, top to bottom): Ron Capps in Funny Car; Leah Pritchett in Top Fuel. // Ron Capps checks out the Dodge Challenger SRT Hellcat Widebody with 3TV's Wally Cahill; JR Todd; Leah Pritchett; Ron Capps checks out the Alice Cooper-signed guitar included with the Hellcat. // JR Todd in Funny Car; Top Fuel winner Steve Torrence.

