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## The King of Funny Cars

By Joan Tupponce  
July 1st, 2010

National Hot Rod Association racing icon John Force is to racing fans what The Beatles were to music fans. Just ask NHRA driver Del Worsham of Al-Anabi Racing about Force's popularity. Worsham beat the veteran driver at U.S. Nationals in 1992 in the semifinals.

"It was a bigger deal to interview him for losing than it was to interview me for winning," he says. "I got out of the car and no one came to interview me. That shows you what he means to the sport."

At 61, Force is, as the saying goes, a force to be reckoned with. His son-in-law, driver Robert Hight, refers to him as the "face of NHRA drag racing." And why wouldn't he? Force is a 14-time Funny Car champion and a 2008 Motorsports Hall of Fame of America inductee with 129 career wins under his belt, giving him the No. 1 spot on the current top 10 list of NHRA Funny Car drivers.

He has won 1,053 racing rounds as well as races on 24 different tracks in 19 states and Canada. The only current events in the NHRA Full Throttle drag racing series that he has not won as of this printing are the Summit Racing Equipment Nationals in Norwalk, Ohio, and the O'Reilly Carolinas Nationals in Charlotte, N.C.

NHRA driver Kenny Bernstein of Kenny Bernstein Racing believes that a great deal of Force's popularity "stems from the tremendous exposure he has received as a result of his success on the track." Fans also enjoy his shtick, Bernstein adds. "People like to listen to his interviews because you can't predict what he'll say next."

Over the years, Force has created a corporate empire that includes John Force Racing, Inc., with 75 employees. "They bust their tail for me to win," he says. His race team includes his daughters 27-year-old Ashley Force Hood, 23-year-old Brittany Force and 21-year-old Courtney Force as well as Hight.

Force hired Hight as a crew member in 1995. He didn't begin driving until 2005. "John definitely puts a lot of money and effort into trying to grow the sport," observes Hight. "He's always thinking of new ways to draw fans."

Tom Compton, NHRA president, thinks of Force as a great business man. "He is one of the hardest working people you will ever meet," observes Compton. "He focuses on his race team 24/7. He will spend money others don't consider spending to make the team better."

As an example, Force was the first NHRA driver to have a trailer outfitted with the latest in technology, everything from computers to a full-fledged weather center. "There was a lot of science and technology in one trailer," Hight says. "It's now the norm. Everyone has them."

Trucks play an integral role in Force's family history. His father, nicknamed "Willie," was a logger and truck driver in the Northwest. "He was a Teamster, Local 208. He drove for Garrett Freightlines out of Boise, Idaho," Force says. "He hauled a little bit of everything."

Force's father served as an inspiration for his son, encouraging him to always follow his dreams. "He believed you had to chase your heart," says Force, who did follow his father into the trucking industry. "Trucking is what I did. It was the romance of the highway. I still have a Class I permit."

He also owns a fleet of 10 Peterbilts, as well as a collection of Harleys and classic cars. "I have more trucks now that I ever dreamed I would have," Force says, noting that he fuels up at Pilots. "I try to stay on the road preaching the gospel."

Even though he enjoyed trucking, Force's passion was racing. "It's been in my

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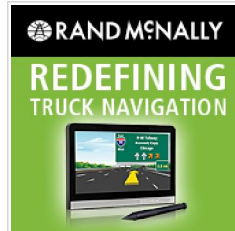
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blood since I was a kid," he says, adding that he would race every available weekend.

In 1974 he took a few weeks off to travel to Australia, where his uncle was racing. "That was my start in racing," he says.

For the first 10 years, Force struggled in the sport. He snagged his first major NHRA win in Montreal, Canada, in 1987. "They used to call me a perennial bridesmaid – I got to the altar but I never won," Force says, laughing. "That first win was a really exciting feeling that you only have once."

Force's highly competitive spirit is as well known in the racing community as his top-notch racing abilities. "When you're on the track, you can't bump the guy out of the way," Worsham says. "John will pat you on the back and say he loves you but then he's going to go out there and try to kick your butt."

Force's dynamic, no-holds-barred personality gives him a unique edge. "There are many sides to him," observes Bernstein. "When he gets excited, he talks a mile a minute. He's often flamboyant and out of control as you see in his interviews, but he's smart on the inside; he has a lot of common sense and street smarts."

Compton sees Force as both a naturally gifted speaker and a stand-up comic. "His enthusiasm is infectious," he says. "He goes in different directions when he talks but ties it all together. John can see the forest through the trees. He gets the big picture."

Force's entertaining personality gets fans to "stay tuned to see what is coming out of his mouth next," says Hight. That's one reason that "Driving Force," a reality show about Force and his family that aired on A&E in 2006 and 2007, was a hit. "That brought a lot more fans to the sport," Hight says. "Little old ladies and truck drivers love him. John is a big fan of the blue-collar worker."

Force's daughter Ashley had to get used to being part of a reality show. "There were times when you saw us fighting but it was about the show," she explains. "We were new at it and the show was new to racing. It took time to get to know each other. It was fun. We had a lot of things captured on camera we wouldn't have had if it wasn't for the reality show."

Over the years, Force has seen and done it all. He laughs when he remembers the time he was sponsored by Wendy's – he's been sponsored by Castrol ever since. "When the Wendy's girl didn't show, I dressed up as the Wendy's girl," he says. "They paid me \$75. I looked funny. I had hairy legs. That's why Castrol gave me the money to run the circus, so I didn't have to be the clown anymore."

Force says he wasn't surprised when his daughters decided to take up racing. "All my kids have grown up at the racetrack. I figured one of them might get involved. Ashley evolved and now Brittany and Courtney. They can drive those race cars like the men."

He may be a team owner but he's still a dad and that fatherly mindset does kick in. He admits he worries about his daughters and that he tries to subdue his competitive drive when he races against Ashley in the Funny Car division. "I always pray for her to win even when she is racing me," he says, pausing before adding, "I do have sponsors that pay me so I have to win too."

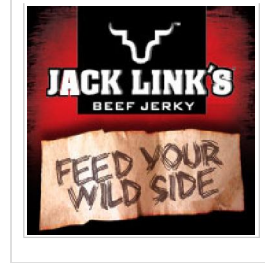
Ashley had no idea she would one day compete in the same division as her father. "I had an interest in working on the cars," she says. "I wanted to be a crew member. I thought they were the coolest people on earth. When I got older, I took auto shop classes. Racing [came] many years later."

She started racing Super Comp dragsters when she was 18 and moved up to Top Alcohol Dragsters before settling into Funny Cars in 2007. "It definitely has something to do with growing up around it," she says of her desire to race. Some of her wins carry special memories. "One of the most exciting was in 2004 in Pomona, our home track. I won Top Alcohol Dragster and my dad won in Funny Car. It was the first time a father and daughter won."

Racing against her father isn't any different from racing any other driver, she says. "I'm used to it. I just focus on the best I can do."


Force changed the way he looked at racing in 2007, when one of his drivers, 33-year-old Eric Medlen, succumbed to injuries from a testing accident at Gainesville, Fla. After that tragedy, John Force Racing and Ford Racing formed The Eric Medlen Project, which focused on finding and improving safety innovations for the sport. Since then, a series of safety measures, everything from significant Funny Car chassis modifications to the installation of a crash data recorder on all nitro cars, have been put into place.

Force had no idea that, a few months later, he would benefit from those safety improvements and changes to the basic Funny Car chassis when he crashed



in Dallas, resulting in serious injuries and a one-month hospital stay. "I give credit to The Eric Medlen Project for saving my life," he says.

Five months after his crash, Force was back in a race car. He returned, not only for himself, but also for his fans. "When I had no money [back in the beginning], people would bring sandwiches to the ropes; they would bring a birthday cake on my birthday," he says. "They never gave up on loving John Force or his daughters or his drivers."

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