

Johnson Jr. Gets Mopar Fired-up for NHRA “Countdown to the Championship” with No. 1 Qualifier Honors at the Carolina Nationals

- Mopar driver Tommy Johnson Jr. earns No.1 qualifier honors for the first of the six-event National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) playoff “Countdown to the Championship” series at the Carolina Nationals
- All four DSR 2015 Dodge Charger R/T Funny Cars will battle in the Countdown and will start in the top half of Sunday's eliminations ladder at zMAX Raceway
- Allen Johnson's enters Countdown fifth in points while qualifying efforts aboard his HEMI-powered Dodge Dart factory hot rod put him tenth on Sunday's Pro Stock eliminations ladder

September 18, 2015, Concord, North Carolina - The National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) playoffs are officially underway and it was Mopar driver Tommy Johnson Jr. that led the fray through qualifying by earning the No.1 position for Funny Car eliminations at the eighth annual NHRA Carolina Nationals, the first national event of the six-race series known as the “Countdown to the Championship”.

Friday qualifying at zMAX Raceway kicked-off the first of three races in three consecutive weeks and saw all four Don Schumacher Racing 2015 Dodge Charger Funny Cars, all of whom are battling for the championship, atop the timing charts with Ron Capps leading his teammates with a 4.018 second pass at 303.64 miles per hour in the opening session. Jack Beckman, who missed out on the Countdown last year but came into this edition as the championship points leader after earning a coveted win at the NHRA U.S. Nationals, started off his playoff efforts with a solid 4.027 second run at 307.86 mph. Tommy Johnson Jr. took the third spot with a 4.047/310.20 in Q1, while Matt Hagan rounded out the top-four by taking his Mopar for a 4.063/ 302.89 drive.

On a cooler Friday evening track, Johnson Jr. took over the top qualifying spot with his career best elapsed time run of 3.971 seconds at 312.42 miles per hour, which also lowered the track e.t. record. That run kept the driver of the Make-A-Wish 2015 Dodge Charger R/T atop the timing sheets through qualifying, but certainly didn't stop him from making improvements on a hot slick track in Q3 with an impressive 4.075 sec / 301.20 mph pass. His final run saw his Mopar overpower the track slightly, but Johnson took a total of seven bonus points along with his second pole position of the season and 12th of his career.

“In the Countdown, you take every point you can,” said Johnson Jr. who jumps from third to second place in the standings with his qualifying efforts and will see Bob Gilbertson as his first round opponent. “They are important. We gave up a few the last run as we were testing a little bit trying to see how far we could push it.”

“I'm not so sure the 4.07 today wasn't more impressive than the 3.97 last night,” Johnson Jr. added. “Just based off of conditions, it was a more impressive run than the run last night just based off of where the competition is at. To outrun the guys that much in that session, it was a great run. I think the conditions are going to be warm again tomorrow. We can really use the data we learned today and hopefully have them just as covered as today.”

Qualifying third on the eliminations ladder, Capps earned his seeding with his 3.994 second / 317.34 mph pass on Friday night and gained a total of four bonus points.

“(Crew Chief Rahn) Tobler and I have talked since Indy and I don't think I've ever heard him so anxious to get to the next race,” said Capps who line up his 2015 Dodge Charger R/T next to Tony Pedregon in the first round. “He found a lot of things during Indy and we felt like we could run with anybody on Monday (during Labor Day eliminations). Unfortunately we had a cylinder go out on us in the second round but we really felt like we had a chance to win Indy. That attitude and the way his outlook was coming into this race, especially Friday, proved to me how right he was. He came out No. 1 after the first session and ended up third after the second session with a 3.99. That's a good start to

the Countdown.”

Coming into the Countdown in second place, Mopar driver Hagan drove his Freightliner paint-schemed 2015 Dodge Charger R/T to a seventh place overall in qualifying to face Cruz Pedregon in the opening round, but missed out on some precious bonus points with runs just outside the top-three spots in each session on Friday.

“It’s hot and we’re trying to scoop up those little points,” said Hagan who dropped to third in the standings after qualifying was done, two points behind his teammate Johnson. “You have to push it out here on every lap. Every point, every lap matters. It’s racing. You have to adapt to the conditions but the crew chiefs have their hands full out here. It’s definitely a challenge. The track surface is really tricky and it’s hot out so those two things combined just make it tough for crew chiefs.”

Beckman, who has taken his DSR Infinite Hero 2015 Dodge Charger R/T to four No.1 qualifier positions and three national titles in just the last five regular season events, will start Sunday’s elimination rounds from the top half of the ladder in eighth place with his best pass of 4.022/304.60. He finished off qualifying with the second best run of the session with a final pass of 4.060 / 300.93 mph and will have to contend with Courtney Force as his first round adversary.

Heading into the NHRA “Countdown to the Championship”, Allen Johnson, who won the NHRA Pro Stock world title in 2012, currently sits fifth in the standings behind points leader Erica Enders-Stevens. Following testing sessions in St. Louis and Charlotte in the past few weeks to prepare for the playoffs, Johnson is feeling confident with the improvements his team has made to the “Magneti Marelli Offered by Mopar” Dodge Dart and his chances to vie for a second championship.

“Our tests went well and we developed our engine program and gained some power even if we aren’t exactly showing that here on a hot track,” said Johnson who is in his 20th season of Pro Stock competition. “We have a really good package right now to enter the playoffs. This track is a little slick and everyone is battling that but I feel like we’re in a really good position for the playoffs. We’re coming in fifth and we want to leave here in that position or better. Lane choice is going to be important to make it through the rounds.”

Johnson’s elapsed time runs improved steadily with each pass posting a 6.585/210.28 to put him seventh in the first qualifying session, then a 6.564/210.73 and a 6.574/209.82 before finishing with his best run of the weekend by posting a 6.571/210.70 to put him 10th overall on the eliminations ladder. The HEMI-powered Greeneville, Tenn., native will see Jason Line as his first round adversary on Sunday morning.

Fellow HEMI-powered Dodge Dart driver, V. Gaines qualified 14th with his quickest pass of the weekend on his last run at 6.670/210.05 and will have Erica Enders-Stevens to contend with in the first round.

The Pro Stock No.1 qualifier position was granted to Greg Anderson for his 6.524/212.26 pass.

ESPN2 will televise 90 minutes of qualifying coverage on Sunday, Sept. 20 starting at 1:30 a.m. (ET) and then re-air an hour of qualifying highlights at 7 a.m. (ET). Three hours of eliminations coverage of the eighth annual NHRA Carolina Nationals will be televised on ESPN2 on Sunday, Sept. 20 starting at 8:30 p.m. (ET).

2015 NHRA Countdown to the Championship Standings (following NHRA Carolina Nationals Final Qualifying)

PRO STOCK (season wins in parentheses)

1. Erica Enders-Stevens* – 2151 (5)
2. Greg Anderson* – 2128 (4)
3. Chris McGaha* – 2107 (2)
4. Jason Line* – 2093 (2)
5. **Allen Johnson* – Dodge Dart – 2082 (1)**
6. Larry Morgan – 2074 (2)
7. Shane Gray – 2065

8. Drew Skillman – 2020
9. Vincent Nobile – 2010
10. Johnathan Gray – 2000
11. **V. Gaines – Dodge Dart – 682**

FUNNY CAR (season wins in parentheses)

1. **Jack Beckman* – (2015 Dodge Charger R/T) – 2147 (5)**
2. **Tommy Johnson Jr.* – (2015 Dodge Charger R/T) – 2115 (2)**
3. **Matt Hagan* – (2015 Dodge Charger R/T) – 2113 (4)**
4. Del Worsham – 2101
5. John Force – 2085 (2)
6. **Ron Capps – (2015 Dodge Charger R/T) – 2080 (2)**
7. Robert Hight – 2067 (1)
8. Tim Wilkerson – 2055 (1)
9. Cruz Pedregon – 2042
10. Alexis DeJoria – 2031

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