

Johnson Jr. Drives Mopar to Funny Car Runner-Up Finish at the NHRA Carolina Nationals

- No.1 Qualifier Tommy Johnson Jr. drives Mopar to runner-up finish at National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) Carolina Nationals
- Johnson Jr.'s final round appearance is the 18th of 19 national events for the newly designed 2015 Dodge Charger R/T Funny Car this season
- Johnson Jr.'s runner-up result at zMAX Raceway puts him second in points for the "Countdown to the Championship"
- Allen Johnson moves Magneti Marelli Dodge Dart up to fourth place in "Countdown to Championship" with semi-final appearance
- Sportsman racer Kevin Helms finishes runner-up in Stock Eliminator final with his 2010 Dodge Challenger Drag Pak

September 20, 2015, Concord, North Carolina - Don Schumacher Racing (DSR) driver Tommy Johnson Jr. drove his Make-A-Wish Mopar to a runner-up finish on a tricky zMAX Raceway surface at the Carolina Nationals, the first of six National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) "Countdown to the Championship" playoff events, and sits in second in the Funny Car standings just six markers behind the points leader. It was the 18th final round appearance in 19 events this season for the newly designed 2015 Dodge Charger R/T Funny Car after spending more than a year in development.

After earning his second pole position of the year by setting a career best elapsed time pass and track record at 3.971 seconds at 312.42 mph, Johnson Jr. took his HEMI-powered machine past Bob Gilbertson, Courtney Force and Alexis DeJoria to advance to his sixth final round appearance of the year.

The Carolina Nationals final elimination showdown pitted the No.1 qualifier against the No.2 qualifier Del Worsham for not only the Wally trophy, but also the lead in the "Countdown to the Championship". Both competitors had near identical reaction times off the start, but Johnson Jr.'s 4.119 second elapsed time run at 300.93 miles per hour couldn't beat Worsham's 4.086 sec/ 307.16 mph pass for the victory and top spot in the Countdown.

"We were disappointed not to get the win after being No. 1 qualifier," Johnson Jr. said. "That's two times this year that we've lost in the final after being No. 1 qualifier. So yes, we're a little disappointed, but in the big picture it was very important to get off to a good start in the Countdown to the Championship, and we did that."

"I'm proud of our guys," he added. "Hopefully, we'll continue this roll we've been on. There are only six races to win the championship, and we moved ourselves up in the points and just a few out of the lead at this first one. We did exactly what we wanted to do, and we're off to a good start."

Seeded seventh on the eliminations ladder, two-time and reigning world champ Matt Hagan took his DSR Freightliner paint-schemed 2015 Dodge Charger R/T past his first round opponent Cruz Pedregon to advance to the quarterfinals. The Mopar driver's day unfortunately went up in tire smoke right off the start in the second round against Worsham.

"You have to go rounds to win championships," said Hagan who sits fourth in the Countdown. "First round losses are so killer in this six race Countdown. We got one round win today but we need to get a couple more. It's just such a tricky racetrack and you can sit here and Monday quarterback it but it's just tough out here. Nobody is really going down it and the guys that are, are putting cylinders out because it tries to spin the tires and different things like that."

"I was surprised when it pulled them loose in the second round after a pretty good run in the first round," added

Hagan. "We were trying to run in different places and trying to find better rubber but it just wasn't out there for us."

Seeded third on the merits of a sub-four second run in qualifying, Ron Capps worked his way through a pedalfest to earn a first round victory against Tony Pedregon. The DSR Dodge Charger R/T driver advanced to the quarterfinals where he lost a close race to John Force. Capps was in the lead when his ride slowed before crossing the stripe with a 4.209/275.06 pass to his competitors 4.143/305.49 run.

"To gain a little bit on our leader in points, we're going to lose a little bit to a couple of people but the product of the Countdown is the matchups," said Capps who remains sixth in the standings and 81 points behind the leader. "We didn't lose a whole lot here but we surely would've liked to gain a little bit. It's definitely going to tighten the race up going into St. Louis."

The Funny Car championship points leader heading into the first race of the playoffs, Jack Beckman was undefeated by any John Force Racing team opponents this season but saw that streak come to an end in the first round against Courtney Force. As a result, the DSR driver of the Infinite Hero 2015 Dodge Charger R/T fell from first to third place with five races left in the championship battle.

"It's flattering that people expect perfection out of you," said Beckman who leading into to the Countdown had four No.1 qualifier positions and three national titles in the last five regular season events including his sweep of the U.S. Nationals where he was No.1 Qualifier, set low elapsed time, top speed and won the coveted title.

"That's a reflection of how good we've been lately but when you get behind the scene of the minutae it takes to run a nitro Funny Car it involves incredibly complicated systems," Beckman added. "No cause for panic. We just faltered a little bit, and that's OK. You have to expect that sometime. We have five more races to go out and win some more trophies and get another championship."

2012 NHRA Pro Stock champ Allen Johnson made some good gains at the Carolina Nationals in his quest for a second world title in the 20 years he and his HEMI engine tuner father Roy Johnson have been competing in the hot rod class. Johnson started the six-event "Countdown to the Championship" playoff series in fifth place and qualified his "Magneti Marelli Offered by Mopar" Dodge Dart in tenth spot for Sunday's elimination rounds.

His opening round opponent, Jason Line, started the playoffs fourth in the standings just ahead of the HEMI-powered hot rod, and Johnson used a stout 0.023-second reaction time on the start line to earn a very important hole shot win with a 6.602/210.05 lap over his competitor's 0.073 reaction time and 6.564/211.03 pass.

Johnson was once again stellar on the tree in his semifinal match-up against points leader Erica Enders-Stevens, serving up a .010-second reaction time to her 0.031, but in the end, it wasn't quite enough of an advantage for his 6.611/209.59 pass to hold off her 6.586/210.31 giving his opponent a 0.0048-second margin of victory.

"All things considered, it really was an awesome start to the Countdown for our Mopar team," Johnson said. "We really need to make an effort to qualify better for the last five races to be in a place to fight and win a championship. That's hurting us. I told my guys today 'If you can't tell, I really want to win this damn thing. Let's get better in St. Louis.' That's the goal. We need to give ourselves the best shot we have on every run and in every session. No one should count us out. We're in the mix and we've got a lot of fight left."

Johnson's semifinal appearance puts him fourth in championship standings and 109 markers behind Enders-Stevens who used a holeshot to beat Vincent Nobile for the national title and build a lead in the points.

V. Gaines, who missed out on a top-ten position in the Countdown to be able to battle for the championship, qualified his HEMI-powered Dodge Dart 14th on the eliminations ladder and was looking to play spoiler in his match-up with Enders-Stevens in the first round and despite his best efforts, was unable to get to the finish ahead of his competitor.

Of note in Sportsman competition, Kevin Helms of Schriever, Louisiana, was looking to add to his 15 national titles in Stock and drove his 2010 Dodge Challenger Drag Pak through five rounds of eliminations to advance to a final

showdown against Brad Plourd. Helms was edged by his competitor right at the finish line by just 0.0030 seconds in a double breakout to finish runner-up.

The next stop for Mopar-powered drivers is the second national event in the six-race NHRA Countdown to the Championship playoffs and the second of three races in three consecutive weeks, the 4th Annual AAA Insurance NHRA Midwest Nationals, scheduled for September 25–27 and take places in the shadow of the famed St. Louis Gateway Arch at Gateway Motorsports Park, in Madison, Illinois.

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

PRO STOCK (season wins in parentheses)

1. Erica Enders-Stevens* – 2231 (6)
2. Greg Anderson* – 2148 (4)
3. Chris McGaha* – 2127 (2)
4. **Allen Johnson – Dodge Dart – 2122 (1)**
5. Larry Morgan – 2114 (2)
6. Vincent Nobile – 2103
7. Jason Line* – 2093 (2)
8. Shane Gray – 2085
9. Drew Skillman – 2053
10. Jonathan Gray – 2032

FUNNY CAR (season wins in parentheses)

1. Del Worsham – 2181 (1)
2. **Tommy Johnson Jr. – (2015 Dodge Charger R/T) – 2175 (2)**
3. **Jack Beckman – (2015 Dodge Charger R/T) – 2147 (5)**
4. **Matt Hagan – (2015 Dodge Charger R/T) – 2133 (4)**
5. John Force – 2125 (2)
6. **Ron Capps – (2015 Dodge Charger R/T) – 2100 (2)**
7. Alexis DeJoria – 2071
8. Robert Hight – 2067 (1)
9. Tim Wilkerson – 2055 (1)
10. Cruz Pedregon – 2042

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